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SHE LOOKED ANXIOUSLY AROUND. * * "I AM HERE!" SAID A MUSICAL VOICE. HE WAS STANDING BESIDE HER—
A TALL, WHITE-FACED STRIPLING, LOOKING EIGHTEEN OR NINETEEN YEARS OF AGE.

A MAD MARRIAGE; Or, THE IRON WILL.

BY MARY A. DENISON.

CHAPTER I.

THE BACHELOR.

"HORACE DUDLEY."

That was the name on the door-plate, and the man who answered to it was both wealthy, and in the best sense of the word, an aristocrat.

He sat in his study, a handsome, resolute

man, inditing a paragraph for his favorite morning paper, which, for want of a wife, he always sat down with at table.

"What was the man thinking of? Advertising for a housekeeper, and offering fearfully good wages to that as yet unseen personage, when there were no less than nine or ten pretty, marriageable girls in that very street, each ready and willing to become his housekeeper, stipulating for no wages *except* board and clothes—and—a husband.

"Yes, yes, I know—too ready—altogether too willing," he suggested, laughingly, to a friend who called in and hinted as much, while he was busy concocting the advertisement. A larger,

handsomer, and bolder type of beauty was that of the new-comer.

"Altogether too ready," he repeated, the saucy fellow. "There's Miss Angela Smythe, so very charmingly attired! always smiling toward some imaginary friend as I drive up the street. There's Anne Bradbury, to whom I hinted that blue was my favorite color, making herself hideous—for she's so dark, you know; how can I help thinking that it's on purpose to attract me? No, Le Roy, I'll tell you what: I once saw a girl on the streets who drove all the women I had ever admired out of my head. You look incredulous, but upon my honor it's a fact—nearly a year ago, too, and until I meet her again, women, even young and adorable girls, smiling with an indefinite giggle, or blushing from head to foot, are to me as if they were not."

"And pray what did this paragon of paragons look like?" asked his friend, as they both arose to leave the house.

"I only saw her for a moment—her eyes were turned from me. By her stature and manner she could hardly be sixteen. Her whole face had a golden tinge and yet it was exquisitely fair. Her eyes—ah! what eyes, my friend!—that same tinge of gold in their brown depths—her hair—that was golden too. I could compare the warmth and richness of her complexion to nothing but a Parian vase of exceeding thinness within which a lamp is burning. I don't think she was rich—she might have been poor, for she had a bundle in her hands such as working girls carry. I should know that girl among a thousand. I should know her if disease had dimmed the glorious eyes, or paleled the cheek. I should know her in the velvets and jewels of a duchess—I should know her in rags and poverty."

"Dudley—I never knew before that you were romantic," said his friend. "That you were an enthusiast was perfectly clear to me—but this little confession of yours has placed your character in a new light. I'll be bound now you quarrel with your housekeepers so as to have the chance of advertising, hoping, in your dreamy soul, that this paragon of human vases with a light shining through, will stumble upon your darkness some of these days. Haven't I hit it now?"

"No, Le Roy—you're wide of the mark. I'm a particular man, and when I see any special untidiness in the woman who undertakes to keep me afloat on the tide of housekeeping—I'm all out with her. I suppose I'm too fastidious—but then as I can have the opportunity of seeing new faces about me, why, I improve it. You would not imagine there was such fun in the world as there is in answering the applications of those who consider themselves competent to cheer my unsocial path through life. Oh! that I could find one of those Madonna-faced creatures who are never obtrusive—who take no liberties yet are not shamefaced—who can ask after your health with just the right dash of matronly solicitude, and do not care to look at you too closely. But I can't do it. There, the matter is finished, so is my discourse. I must hurry with it to the office—so, good-morning."

CHAPTER II.

VIRGINIA AND THE SCHOOLMASTER.

PERHAPS you know that some of the prettiest places in this country are in Connecticut. In a little town famous for its romantic beauty, lived Virginia Owen with her widowed mother and a step-sister. Virginia was not yet sixteen, but Florida was eight years older. Their house stood on the side of a hill, from which the sunny vales below, with their bright meadows of shining green, their waters, shadowy woods, and knots of clustering houses, looked a paradise.

From the cottage, which we will describe presently, a winding road led to a grove of young pines. Another path took its direction straight down the

hill, ending on the main thoroughfare. The day had nearly gone, as a small, lithe figure, graceful as a fawn, left the house by the back way and tripped along the path on the road to the little grove. The sunshine was leaving the surface of the river and crimsoning the distant day before its final disappearance, as the young girl turned a moment, her quick eye searching out at a glance all the beautiful points of the unparalleled scene.

The child—she looked scarcely more—seemed herself, as she stood there, enveloped with a kind of sunlight splendor. Her beautiful tresses played against a cheek through which the rich blood shed strange, luminous crimson, and her brown eyes, liquid with a peculiar molten light, gave evidence that the temperament which they typed was that of exceeding sensitiveness—tender and full of poetic dreamings. Hers was one of those natures whose strength appears in the sweetness—the harmony which controls it—in its similitudes to all gentle, beautiful, clinging things in creation.

Her brow, fair and white, was partly hidden by a wide-brimmed chip hat, from whose crown ribbons of a pale blue fluttered. Her dress was white—its material of a coarse texture, but so perfectly did it shape itself to the delicate outlines of the rounded figure, a queen could not have wished for drapery more statuesque in its foldings, more delicate in its apparent fineness.

Turning with a half-sigh from the glorious landscape, worthy the pencil of a Claude, the childlike, gentle Virginia Owen tripped along the stony path until the pine-leaves slipped under her feet and the fragrance of the trees imparted a delightful odor to the atmosphere. Here, in the entrance of the grove, she looked anxiously around through the narrow avenues made by the tall, straight trunks of the trees, clapping her hands impatiently.

"I am here, Virginia," said a musical voice. He was standing beside her, a tall, white-faced stripling, looking eighteen or nineteen years of age. His cheeks were dashed fatally with a blazing red, his tawny hair hung in light curls around a brow of splendid proportions. His eyes seemed shining as with moist electric sparks—his lips were brighter, more crimson than his cheeks. He was dressed in a well-kept suit of black broadcloth, but for all his care the seams were dust white. His hands (he carried a book in one of them) had a bloodless transparency, and appeared almost as luminous as a butterfly's wings.

"Have you had a pleasant day?" she asked aloud, smiling.

"Oh, no; just the contrary—for you were absent. You know I looked for you—my eyes were among the trees oftener than on my classes till the clock struck ten; then I knew there was no hope. Why did you stay away?"

"Because Florida said I must. She was in one of her worst moods to-day."

"And she made you work horribly, I know. Your poor little hands; how red they look! Upon my word! Why, Virginia—they are wounded!"

"That is nothing," said the girl, striving to pull away the bruised fingers; "it is only the washing; I shall get used to that."

"The washing—you wash! a little fairy thing like you? Impossible; I can't and won't believe it of her. She is an ogress."

"Don't be silly, Parker," said Virginia, laughing; "she is a very superior woman—only so cross! We generally have all those things hired, you know; but Florida, taking on an uncommon fit of economy, thought we two might just as well save the expense. It seems as if, failing in the attainment of the great things she wishes to do, she is determined to put as much toil and burden upon herself as she can carry."

"But you—to make you work so—'tis shameful. She is large and strong—strong as a man, I should say; while you are so little and delicate—it only to wash rose-leaves if anything."

"What a conceit!" cried Virginia, her musical laugh ringing out again. "Come, now you know my day's discomforts, tell me yours."

"Your absence made all my sorrow," said the young man; for, being a school-teacher, he should be honored by the title of manhood, even though his cheek and chin were almost beardless. He led her to a seat—richer in its emerald braid and embroidery of moss than a queen's throne—and threw himself down beside her, on the dry, sweet, slippery pine-carpet.

"And yet, not quite all," he added, "for that Madge Spicer worried me into a fever. It hasn't left my face yet. I believe the girl is crazy; for, because I gave Miss Spenser a little help in one of her mathematical demonstrations, she flung her slate and book across the floor, and declared she would go right to the committee and tell them how partial I was. For a few moments she was outrageous. I could do nothing with her. I tried reasoning, coaxing and threats, but all to no purpose. She is a spoilt girl, but her father is a man of great influence and could set me adrift at any moment. Oh, dear! it's a wearing life though. I wonder what makes that Madge train so? Upon my word she will worry my life out of me."

Virginia felt her cheeks glow.

"I'll tell you what," she said, without thinking, "it's the same motive that troubles my sister—jealousy."

"Jealousy? Oh! Virginia."

"You know what I mean," said the girl, rapidly, "that is—Florida, you see, never was pleased with me—well, because her father—everybody, perhaps, liked me the best—no, I should not say *that*—petted me and showed me the most attention. I remember she said to me once, 'Virginia, whoever I love you must come between us; it is my fate.' She is such a strange creature—a fatalist—and oh! so superstitious. I sometimes think one of those old, grand, but dark and unhappy spirits we read of has taken possession of her—she is so mysterious, so unhappy!"

The student was thinking, and, like Virginia's, his cheek had taken on a deeper crimson. "Every one she loves," he muttered to himself. "Can it be, then?"

"Well—I think, to be candid," said Virginia, after a pause, as if she was answering a question, "Madge Spicer likes you mightily, and she is vexed because you don't pay her all the attention. She is handsome, you know, and, as you say, spoiled. Poor child! she has no mother!"

"Handsome! I don't know. Her eyes are too bold, like her manners. Her glances strike you—are hurled at you. Oh, Virginia! when I write my book—that dear book that shall make us both famous—what women I shall paint! You shall stand for the portrait of my best and highest type. But they will not all be angels, most assuredly; I have your sister and Madge Spicer, and some others I could tell of, who are models in their way."

"Do you know it is getting very dark?" cried Virginia, starting up.

"Do you know there is going to be a beautiful moon?" queried Parker, as he wound an arm about her waist, and, spite of her blushing, forced her gently to sit down again.

"Yes, but we shall not see that for an hour," she replied.

"Well—you are not afraid of the dark, or of me either, are you?" he asked. "Do stay; it is so sweet to have you here. The wind seems like fingers of marble patting over my cheeks; I wonder what makes them so hot? I wish Madge Spicer would befrantic turns, what a character she would have been in the French Revolution. There was a woman, you know, who made a speech to the noisy crowd, and because one laughed at her she boxed his ears. When they set out for Versailles, she led them on, a saber in her hand, took a cannon from the Hotel de

Ville, harnessed a horse to it, and led it to the city, holding a lighted match in her hand. Well, I always identify Madge with that audacious female. I can see her, her cheeks reddened with anger, her eyes shooting flames, and her red hair flying wildly in the air.

"Oh, Parker! you know she has not red hair."

"Yes, she has; I call it red—and so lusterless! At any rate, there's a fiery red tinge about it. Isn't it lovely here? I could think up a poem," he added, after a moment of silence. "Oh, Virginia, I wish I was rich!"

"I have heard Florida wish that so often," said Virginia; "what good will the wishing do?—not make you rich, certainly."

"No; but it is pleasant to think what one might do," he said, lazily gathering the pine-leaves in his fingers and throwing them down in a shower. "No more drudgery of teaching then—for, say what you will, Virginia, the mind does contract, shut in a never-ending circle; the same lessons over and over and over; the same class of intellect to interest; the same faces; dull and passionless repetitions, like those of a parrot. If they would only show some genius—ask what this is for and why that is so—it would wake up my soul; for positively it goes to sleep, unless I can feel that your strange eyes are looking at it."

"My strange eyes—looking at your soul?" cried Virginia, in surprise.

"Yes, truly—your strange, beautiful eyes. I liken them to wells of exceeding depth and purity, and then to flames so ethereal that I can see the very thoughts behind them; and your gaze penetrates me—I am jealous of all I say to myself, and feel; for it seems as if you knew."

Virginia was looking down; her heart bounded at this sweet praise.

"I thought it was Florida who had the strange eyes," she said, after a short pause.

"Well, she has, in another way—singularly passionate eyes—wells, but not clear and limpid ones—fires, but burning and destroying. What a peculiar being she is! I could admire, but never love her."

"Yet she has her good qualities," said Virginia.

"Who has not?" was the reply.

"And so ambitious as she is! I do believe were she wealthy, as she wishes she was so often, she could do every thing. It is a pity she was not kept longer at school—she has a wonderful mind. She is not at all like common folks that we see moving about us every day. Did you ever notice that? There's a sort of dignity even in the way she handles a broom."

"Yes, I have noticed," said the youth, speaking with emphasis. "I'll tell you what she puts me in mind, when in motion: of an electric machine, highly charged. It seems as if sparks could fly out of her if you but touched her. She is full of power of a certain kind—and can easily influence others. If she were a teacher, now, in my place, there would be no insubordination—the flash of her eye would settle every thing: She is out of her place—out of her sphere—but she'll work up to it. Nature never intended her to be a drudge, even with all her splendid physical attainments, no more than it did you with your little taper fingers and airy form like a sylph."

"Oh! hush—no flattery!" laughed Virginia.

"Look there, darling," he said, pointing through the slim opening to a glowworm-like light. "That's the moon rising—the beautiful round moon. In less than twenty minutes we shall see her royal mantle thrown over the hills. And it will flutter, flutter along, till the invisible hands of night carry its star-like folds and wrap the old Connecticut in them till she looks like a river of molten silver. I wouldn't lose the view with you by my side, for the world. See, how fast the darkness opens—here an avenue, there a kingly road. Do you tremble? are you afraid now?"

"No. I believe not," said Virginia, reassured.

"But I am staying too long; Florida will call me to a woeful account."

"Florida! who cares for her?" cried the youth. "She is a dragon who eats up all your little joys. Take care that you don't sow some of her teeth in my heart; though, perhaps—Heaven knows—if I was more like her, I should be better fitted for the world and its struggles. This morning I ate stale Indian bread."

Virginia burst into a mellow laugh.

"That transition reflects no great credit upon your taste," she said, still laughing merrily.

"I happened to think of it on the moment," he replied, laughing likewise. "It was sour, and has made me sour all day, I believe—that and the dearth of your face. I think sometimes when I am sitting down to these coarse country breakfasts—oh! for the corporation of a honey-bee and the heart of a red rose! All sorts of delicious visions rise up before me to cheat my senses. Perhaps one of my scholars sits opposite with round eyes and gaping mouth till his plate is filled, and then down goes everything. It makes my jaws ache to see the rest eat—and I, famishing, can only nibble here and there. I stayed once at farmer Spicer's, and Madge was so attentive. She heaped my platter (it was blue, and had a little boy with a pitcher in his hand glazed on the surface) with hot, clammy bread, a something they call scrapple, and, most odious horror of all, a gigantic green pickle! I was particularly sensitive that morning, as I had been standing at the door among the honeysuckles, and they always suggest the idea of food as ethereal as their fragrance. You don't eat anything," she said, looking at me so compassionately, while her bread and scrapple and two enormous pickles vanished. I pleaded indisposition. 'Well,' said she, 'if I am ever so sick, I can eat pickles.' Since then she has seemed sorer than ever."

"You are forgetting yourself now, and talking scandal!" cried Virginia, laughing heartily, even as she spoke.

"It is very unkind of me, I suppose," he replied, "and perhaps I ought to go into the brown bread, scrapple, pork and beans, and learn to eat them. But I am strangely constituted. I have shed more tears over my mother's accusation that I was a dainty child, than I shall perhaps ever shed again for far greater trials."

"For pity's sake, what can you eat?" cried Virginia, a small alarm in her voice.

"Whatever is seasoned well by the sun," he replied gravely. "I reject artificial condiments entirely—and confess I should like to live in a world without cooking stoves. Ugh! their red glare makes me sick. A month ago I boarded at farmer Lin-scott's. He is a man after my own heart. Oh! what honey they had! Honey and milk of their semblance, at least, must be angel's food."

"I was just going to say that you should never eat and drink at our house, but since honey and milk satisfy you, perhaps you may. We'll set you a white cloth, too—a relic of my mother's family—a perfect wonder of whiteness and beauty—and if you cannot eat Florida's cooking, you can enjoy none. She is an artist at that, and sets her table, I sometimes tell her, as if it were going to have its portrait taken. We have old silver and cut glass, too, for company; so when will you come? I'm going home now."

They both walked slowly out of the grove, treading daintily upon embroidery, silver-like, that they touched no sooner than it overlapped their feet and sometimes ran in waving lines like shining floss up to their very faces.

They stood on the left side of the little quaint homestead. The moon shed floods of amber luster all over its old-fashioned porch, rich with hanging honeysuckles—made the queer, diamond-paned windows glitter as with pale fire, and showed the wealth of flowers that grew in the cultivated garden. It stood so boldly out from the shadows of the trees grouped around it, that every shingle—every spot of

green and yellow moss upon its roof—every ledge, swallow's nest, window-sill, and tiny creeper was distinctly penciled by the wonderful limning of the moonlight.

"It's a dear old home," half sighed Virginia, as though fearing that in the far-away future there was a prospect of leaving it for another.

"The oldest in the county, isn't it?" asked Parker.

"Yes; my ancestors among the pilgrims came over from Plymouth, and were the first, or nearly the first, settlers here. When Florida is in one of her best moods, I'll take you in to see the old leather-covered chair that was brought from Holland—the most curious old thing! And then we have silver, dating from 1600—not much worn, it seems, either, only some of the ornaments rather flattened. If mother is not in too much pain, she will tell you some stories will help you make out your book—that book—you know, and—"

She started—there was a step near them, and a sound of the breaking of a branch, but if any one had passed them, it was done so quickly that neither saw what nor who.

Presently one of the little casement windows slowly opened. Out into the moonlight, that wavered like a glory all around it, looked a face dark, beautiful, but, just then, evil. Its flashing eyes, unnaturally large, seemed glancing over to where the lovers stood. A full, round bust leaned over the window-sill.

"Virginia!" it said, sharply. The voice was low-toned and by no means musical; yet it was a weird voice that one would listen for again.

"I am here, Florida," replied the young girl, after a mute caress, springing out of the shadows that environed the two.

"I thought I heard you; come in. It is time that all children were abed."

Saying this, and knowing that her word was law in that little household, she shut the casement again. There was a whisper or two—among which could be distinguished the word, "She is an ogress"—a clasping of hands for good-night, and Virginia unlatched the little gate, hurried up the flower-bordered path, turned to take one more look at the glorious night, then the door closed her in; and the young man, waiting till he saw the last of the white garments, sighed, turned and retraced his way to the farm-house in which he was "boarding out," looking forward to a night made sleepless by that wearing fever and the burning thoughts that consumed his soul for want of utterance.

CHAPTER III.

FLORIDA AND HER DECISION.

"WELL, so you have had a famous evening of it, I suppose. If father were alive I very much doubt whether he would allow these night walks, Virginia."

The elder of the two girls spoke thus, as, standing at the head of the narrow staircase, she held a candle that sent faint light into the little entry below. Sufficient, however, to show that the balustrade was black and polished with age, and heavy with rude oaken carving. Enough to give prominence to the stupendous rifle that was slung on one side—the black leather-chain near the porch, and the antique wainscoting over all. The quiet gleam—the masses of deep shadow—the beautiful face upon which the candle-light made a red glory, and the shining golden head moving reluctantly up, made a rare picture.

"I don't think he would care much out here," half sighed the maid, her white hand making reaches over the somber banister—"we all know everybody," she added.

"Still it is talked about much more than I should wish if I were you," said Florida, holding one hand over the candle-flame, now that she had turned into another passage where the draft was strong.

"Talked about!" cried Virginia, with a little deprecatory motion—"what is talked about?"

They had entered the low-ceiled chamber now.

and Florida, placing the candle down, turned away with a look of gloom darkening all her forehead as she replied:

"Your walking here and there at such unreasonable hours—meeting that boy of a schoolmaster in the woods at night—in unusual places at unusual times. I confess I am out of all patience with you."

"How do you know I meet him in the woods?" asked Virginia.

"Because I *do* know," replied Florida, in the cross, short way that always intimated she wished no more questioning on the subject.

Virginia hardly knew yet how to defend herself. She stood irresolutely, unpinning a pretty sash of blue that depended from her waist, when a thin, querulous voice cried out from the distant gloom of the chamber:

"Is that my Jenny? Come here my own child."

The room extended the entire length of the house, and on one side the ceiling sloped. It was furnished with a few calico-covered arm-chairs, two very aged claw-footed tables, a lounge of home manufacture that served Virginia for a bed, and two bedsteads, one of them high-posted and covered with long sweeping curtains, the other that stood in the center of the chamber, quite small and tasteful. Toward the first of these two went Virginia, and drew aside the curtains, taking care to insure a place of greater safety for a couple of well-worn crutches that stood near.

"My own darling, why didn't you stay—Florry didn't like to tend me," said the same voice, while the light showed a thin attenuated figure, whose sunken eyes, protruding cheek-bones and high, unnaturally white forehead, from which strayed a few scattered silver hairs, gave a ghastly and preternatural look to the whole being of the invalid.

"You told me I might go, mother," said Virginia, gently, stooping and kissing her forehead.

"I thought then you would bring me home some flowers, or a few berries—I am so neglected!" said the voice, wearily. "I wish I could get away from here," she continued, still fretfully. "I came, as young and pretty as you are, Jenny—my eyes were blue, and could shine, then. Thomas, your father, used to straighten out my long curls and let them go, quick, to see how naturally they would cling up against my temples. Thomas was a handsome man—and my first love. I don't know—it seems sort o' fanciful, you know, dear—but sometimes I think he sits here, at the head, just as he used when I was very ill, and a strange calm steals over me. I forget I am old and lame and sick, and to go sleep still thinking, you know, that he is watching there. He used to say, 'Mary, I hope we shall die very near together, for it seems as if I could not sleep in my grave and know you lonely.' So, perhaps, you see, he may come sometimes; but for all that, I wish we had died together—I wish we had."

"Mother, you must stop talking; Virginia, come away, do, and let her rest. She'll be miserable to-morrow, you know. As it is, I must give her some medicine; I didn't like the looks of her eyes to-day—she'll keep us all awake."

The invalid caught the hands of her child as she heard the footsteps of Florida.

"Dear mother, don't you see Florida is right?" whispered Virginia, soothingly. "You will almost die with the pain to-morrow, if you get no sleep to-night. It is late, darling—won't you let me go? won't you try to sleep?"

"Yes, yes," murmured the sick woman with a sigh, as she released the little hands, and took the preparation of opium which Florida had mixed; "perhaps when they all desert me he will come again," she added, in plaintive tones; "go, Jenny—go, child."

Virginia retired to her simple couch; but Florida, lighting another candle, took a book to the table and was soon busy with its contents. As she read, or studied, she shifted her position, nervously, again and again. Virginia lay scanning the beautiful but stern profile, as often as it turned that way.

and wondered at her as she always did—wondered what the power was of whose mystical influence the schoolmaster had spoken. That this woman, so full of vitality, so strong, determined and energetic, did possess such a power she knew, for she felt it. She could never make excuses to her—never even defend herself from any charge. Angrily as she might feel toward others who infringed upon her rights, toward Florida she was conscious of a blind subservience—a sort of helplessness that made her a very child. Not that she loved her, for she did not; what sentiment of sisterly affection she felt was so inwrought with fear—a kind of nameless dread, that it produced nothing of that quiet happiness existing between members of a family who have long lived together. Virginia's father had died when she was but two years old. Her mother, by one of those strange occurrences that almost seem fatalities, married a foreigner, who had some little fortune; so for many years, even from her infancy, Virginia had been subject to this ambitious, erratic Florida. The second husband, however, loved as devotedly as the first; and on his death-bed extracted a faithful promise from his own child—a promise that, in its nature and amid its surroundings, partook of the character of an oath—that she would never desert his widow or her child. At that time, Virginia was ten, and Florida eighteen; so it was six years previous to the commencement of my story that Florida, on her knees, in tears, and filled with the most passionate grief, had given her vow. From that time she took every thing into her own hands and managed the little property admirably. The widow meeting with an accident that made her an almost helpless cripple, affairs were thrown more completely on her, and she ruled without let or hindrance.

Still, the girl, possessed of a powerful and original mind, did not feel satisfied with her lot. She thirsted for knowledge, fame, and a high station. If she could not compass these by the power of her own intellect, she determined to obtain them by resolution, will and management. At the head of something she would be—whether of a district-school, a college, or a splendid establishment, time should determine. Virginia, with her sweet, fresh bloom and beauty, she looked upon as a rival, already. She felt that the might of her simple goodness was greater than any combination of forces or attainments in her own character; and, knowing her influence upon the gentle girl, she wished to subordinate—to absorb her as it were, and so keep her restricted to the bound of her own desires and intentions.

At last, as she sat reading, Florida turned her eyes toward where Virginia lay, as she had thought, asleep. They encountered the innocent look of Virginia, fixed full upon her as it had been since she had first sat down.

"That is what has made me so uneasy," she said, aloud.

"My looking at you?" queried Virginia.

"Yes—and I, trying to forget myself, could not. You ought to be asleep, and, perhaps, dreaming of the boy up yonder."

Virginia turned a rosy red, but to hide her confusion she asked:

"What are you doing?"

"Deep in study, I suppose some people would call it," replied Florida; "but as you have broken the spell, it's of no use for me to try and fix my thoughts again."

She put aside the book, lifted herself, threw down with one hand the great waves of hair that she had bound in her own capricious style. It hung long and glittering like a veil of many folds, a slumbrous luster in it that only waked and shone when she moved.

"She is like a queen!" thought Virginia.

At that moment Florida turned round, the hair still hanging uncoiled in both hands.

"I am going to the city," she said, abruptly.

It was her way—but Virginia did not comprehend her immediately.

"You—going to the city?" she asked. "When? to-morrow?"

"No, not to-morrow, but whenever we can get ready."

"We!" almost gasped her sister. "What! to—"

"Stay!" said Florida, finishing the sentence.

"To stay! You—I—and mother?" cried Virginia, slowly.

"Yes; you, I and mother. Of course your mother will go—she has no one to depend upon but me, for some things; of course you will go, for you have no other home, and no prospect of another—unless you married that boy," she added, with a half sneer, "and his chance is worse than yours."

"To live in the city—in the great, dreary city," cried Virginia, her voice sharp with sudden horror.

"Hush—you will wake your mother. Oh! I forget," she added, half to herself, "she has taken the medicine—she'll not wake till morning."

"It is a stupid sleep," exclaimed Virginia, looking yearningly over to where her mother lay, her thoughts for a moment diverted from the strange news she had just heard; "I don't believe it is right to give her narcotics."

"It is right to do anything to put her out of pain," said Florida; at which Virginia recoiled, looking at her in the childish, almost fearful way in which she was used. "Well," Florida spoke again, after a pause so still that the tick of the death-watch sounded weirdly, rapid and strong, "are you reconciled to the idea yet?"

"Oh! for heaven's sake, Florida, don't say that you meant it!" exclaimed Virginia, half-rising: "don't say you meant that we should leave our dear home and go over to that wilderness."

"You are a little fool," exclaimed Florida, turning fiercely round, now pinning the great meshes of hair against the back of her head; but, as she stood there, it seemed as if she repented of her harshness. Her eye grew softer, her lip lost its curl, and she seemed irresolute whether to soothe or reproach her. Virginia, lying there, seemed so infantile, so helpless—her white arms folded and her face hidden upon them—her linen night-robe swaying so delicately to the rounded shoulders and lithe waist, sobs shaking her whole frame.

"Hear to reason, child," said Florida, more softly; "what are you grieving about? Look here—I will tell you something if you will listen. You are beautiful—you have no idea how beautiful you are. I am not repulsive, notwithstanding"—she seemed to think better than to speak what was uppermost, so she paused a moment, while Virginia grew more quiet. "I, too, am what some call beautiful, though in a different way from you. Do you—did you, ever think what beauty may command?"

"I don't understand," replied Virginia, who had raised her head, and while tear-drops like big white pearls stood under her lashes, regarded her half-sister with a curious though piteous look.

"You poor little goose! Why, wealth, child, unbounded wealth—character, influence, everything. There are men in the city who would lay a fortune of millions at your feet for the sake of calling you wife."

"Don't sell me," sobbed Virginia, with an appealing look, "don't talk to me of such things. I don't want wealth—I don't want influence; but, oh! to give up Kennie, dear old Kennie!"

"Pshaw! what's the use of wasting my words!" cried Florida, rising from the side of the little couch.

"And mother? how will she, how can she live in the close city?" cried Virginia.

"You know very well how she talks, said Florida, in her usually cold, contemptuous tones. "She is longing all the time to get away. My brain fairly aches sometimes with the repetition of her cry—'Oh! I wish I was away from this place and never could remember the past.'"

"Poor mother," sighed Virginia; "she will be away

soon enough without any one's intervention; and I think—I fear, she will die the sooner for leaving the old cottage."

"Well, I shan't," retorted Florida; "and I'm sure I die here daily. Once in the city, I'll let the rent support your mother. I'll work for you and myself, too; and you—only think of the thousand and one resources of young girls! Why, you can dress so well! no more need of turning, dyeing and making over, but elegant fabrics of all kinds and—"

"My head aches so—I had rather we wouldn't talk," said Virginia, gently.

"Oh! I'm willing," was the response; and, putting out the little light, Florida went to her rest.

CHAPTER IV.

UNCLE BARBY'S PHILOSOPHY.

"STOP—it was a dream—no—no—it could not be, after all. There she stood, her long, dark hair in her hands, the rich gloss gleaming out here and there as she said it."

Virginia strained her eyes through the blue gloom of the dawn. Then she sat up, and, drawing herself together, began to think. Her mother still slept, with heavy breathing. Florida was up, as Virginia knew by the bustle below stairs.

"To go from here," murmured the young girl—"to leave my dear home, the place where I was born—to leave Kennie—and—and—Parker! What a fearful feeling it gives me—as if I were dying!" and, pressing her hands to her face, she shivered. "It's very hard to have such a sister, and she not my own, yet taking my destiny in her hands," she went on, murmuringly. "Well—if I must, I must; but, I know I shall die there—I know I shall!"

Slowly and with little spirit she performed the duties of her toilet and hurried down to help Florida. At sight of her glowing face, and large, shining eyes she shuddered, and then she thought of what the young schoolmaster had likened her to—an electrical machine. She felt her influence, as the steady eye, now cold, bent fully upon her, and obeyed her motions like an automaton.

"You must milk, this morning, Virginia," Florida said, hurrying about her work. Her dark dress was not becoming, save that it sat closely and displayed her beautiful form—and the sleeves were turned up far above the elbows, showing splendid arms that flashed whitely as she moved them to and fro.

Virginia took the milking-pail and went out to the barn. The old cow gave a low cry of recognition, at which the gentle heart of the girl swelled again.

"Oh, Kennie!" she cried, "I can't leave you; and yet I feel that I must—she wills it. Oh, Kennie! I am going to the city. I am going away from everything good and beautiful—how can I bear it?"

So, through the tears, she seemed scarcely to see the rich, white fluid that fell over her fingers, and slowly brimmed the pail, but sat there talking to the quiet creature, and seeming to gain strength and comfort as the cow turned its mild eyes upon her, giving long, gentle glances.

A shadow entered the doorway. She looked up and met the kindly brown eyes of an old man, who, leaning on his crutch, stood regarding her intently. As soon as he met her gaze his brow contracted, and he moved his crutches uneasily.

"Uncle Barby, good-morning! how are you to-day?" Virginia asked, in as cheery a voice as she could assume.

"Oh, I'm 'bout as well as I ever expect to be, Miss Jenny," he replied; "rheumatism's shifted to my feet an' wankles, and I've got the Lombardy in my back, besides shaking all over with the ager that I caught in Jarsey, along o' fighting them red-coats; and the jumpin' toothache, with an nold man like me kep' awake nights, an' sufferin' in the j'int's and the marrer is rather hard, countin' in old age, an' no chance o' getting the pension, me nor the old woman neither; so, say I, 'blessed be the Lord for all His mercies'—which I always acknowledges the hand o' Him."

"I hope Aunt Barby is well this morning," said

Virginia, slacking her hand as the pail filled to the brim.

"The Lord is marcful to all his critters, Miss Jenny, and not to say nothing of her period-like headache that comes jest as soon's the moon's at its full, the wrist she sprained come ten years Christmas that's troublous when the wind changes, and not to say nothin' ag'in' a temper that wasn't naterally from the first sweeter than molasses, and throwing in a little trouble with the spine, a corn or two, and the touch of the numb palsy she had when Deacon Joe's darter died, and that's kept her head goin' wiggle waggle, and never a stop to it sence, I may say that my mistress enjoys her health—for the like may the Lord make us all thankful—I always gives glory to Him."

"What! even for trouble, uncle Barby?" asked Virginia, her beautiful cheeks glowing as she stood ready to poise the rich milk that bubbled and dimpled with the airiest, most fairy-like motion.

"And why not, Miss Jenny? If everything comes from the hand o' the Lord, why shouldn't we glorify Him in everything? When I was shot down by them red-coats in Jarsey, and left for dead, thinks I, 'well, it's mighty onsartin whether I ever see daylight ag'in from the window of that little red house where I was born; but if I die, an' it's the will of the Lord, why so mout it be; and if I'm saved, it'll be the will o' the Lord just the same'—so you see, what should I care, anyhow? So I didn't give myself no sort of trouble about it, but jest lay still till I was picked up—and the Lord let me live, for which blessed be His name; for I enjoys my food now, at eighty, and has my sight pretty reg'lar, and my hearin' oncommon."

"But uncle Barby, what if the Lord don't always send trouble? what if we make it for ourselves?" asked Virginia, preparing to leave the barn.

"Well, it don't matter much, I expect," said the old man, musing over the question. "I guess we're born for trouble, mout it be more nor less, anyhow, and I reckon the ain't much done in the world but what the Lord has his hand in it," and with this piece of wisdom sententiously delivered, Virginia was obliged to be content, for the old man hobbled off, and she entered the house.

Then fell the old trouble upon her. Every object looked doubly dear to her. The sun, in great golden reaches, compassed the pine door—gilded up the pretty oaken book-case set in the wall—fell yellowly on the simple breakfast prepared for two; and, as Florida passed in and out of the soft, fluidlike gold, her person was transformed with something purer, but her eyes were yet glowing, passionate—nor at all like Virginia's, with their melting, amber transparency.

She longed to speak of the last night's proposal, and assure herself, painful as it would be, that she was not in a dream, wandering to and fro without will and without purpose. She wished Florida would allude to it, but the busy woman seemed wrapped about with her usual cold impenetrability.

"I don't know whether I can do that ironing alone," at last fell on Virginia's ear. She looked up anxious and wistful, so anxious and wistful that Florida half smiled, yet contemptuously. "I suppose you want to go to school," she added.

"I should like to, very much," said Virginia, timidly; "it is such a drawback to lose a lesson here and there."

"And to lose some other things," said Florida.

Virginia blushed and looked vexed, but answered nothing.

"Well, I will leave the ruffling to you, then, for I have sewing that must be done, so you can get away earlier at noon, and earlier at night; but, what are you going to do for school when you get into the city?"

"Oh, I can't think about it at all—I can't think it at all," said Virginia, hurriedly, the tears brimming up to her eyes.

"Your pictures of the city are dolorously framed, I see," said Florida, a wicked light in her eyes;

"well, perhaps if you can't think of it at all, you can get some thoughts, some suggestions from others—your consumptive teacher, for instance."

"Consumptive!" cried Virginia, her eyes flashing through tears and indignation, while she tried to keep down the choking that filled her throat. "How cruel you can be!"

"I will prove to you by-and-by whether I am cruel," said Florida, her tones lighter. When I see you in the magnificent house I have planned for you—wealth at your command—some nobleman of nature, not to be despised because he has a fortune, willing to surround you with all that your heart can desire—then you will say to me, 'Florida, I thank you that you kept me from a miserable fate—I acknowledge that you knew best what was good for me.'"

Virginia said nothing; not that there were words wanting, but the sense of her dependence, the overbearing exaction of her sister's character, and, besides that, the grief at her unkind reference to the schoolmaster, prevented her from speech. She arose silently from the table, yet not without bending a glance that reproached her sister more eloquently than could the language of keenest reproach.

CHAPTER V.

MADGE SPICER'S JEALOUSY.

ON that same morning rose the schoolmaster, unrefreshed. That dull ache of the vitals to which long suffering had accustomed him, stole his sleep, and robbed rest of all her magical power. The physical regeneration that comes with morning to every healthy frame, it was not his to know. As he combed his straggling locks into order before a glass wofully cracked and stained, it occurred to him that his face was growing thin. "And yet, there's a look of health about it, too," he said to himself; "none of my urchins at school can boast of ruddier color;" and the poor boy smiled as he thought of the aching chest, and deemed it was all owing to his irksome round of duties, and that when he should conquer circumstances, and surround himself with little pleasures that should not interfere with his plans of dream-life—above all, when he should enter that rose-leaf existence, in which all coarse things (coarse food included) could be banished by the magic charm of genius—then he should be well—oh! how well!

After partaking of his breakfast with an indifferent appetite, groaning often in his soul because food was urged upon him which he could not refuse—seeing the sneer in the face of his hostess, which said as plainly as ever expression can speak, "dainty," he took his hat for a walk. As usual his steps tended toward the pretty cottage where Virginia lived, and, as usual, the young girl met him half-way.

"Virginia, my queen!" he said, proudly, then paused irresolutely, adding: "but if I was going to crown you, I'm afraid it would be with rue. What makes you look so solemn?"

"Because I feel twenty years older," said the young girl, trying vainly to clear her brow and assume the cheerfulness she felt not.

"Ah! I see; Florida has been manufacturing time for you. Some of her harsh words are swinging against your heart like a leaden pendulum; isn't it so?"

"Oh, dear! don't speak of it, Parker," Virginia exclaimed with almost a cry, while blushing cheeks and tear-filled eyes attested to the bitterness of the pang she suffered, and felt she should inflict. "I might as well tell you, and have done with it. Florida is going to the city, and will take mother and me along with her."

"No! Virginia—no—no," said Parker, stopping abruptly. His voice was unwontedly low, but then the tones were fierce and hollow.

"But what can I do? Oh! I had almost rather die"—here the tears choked her voice—"but when Florida wills a thing, you know it must be done. I have seemed in a dream ever since. Oh, Parker! do you really feel so bad?"

She had looked up almost unconsciously; but now her gaze was riveted on his cheeks, crimson with a passionate hectic, his lips white and bitten, his eyes flashing angrily.

"She is a serpent, Virginia," he said in a slow hissing whisper; "she wants to part us, as the thing of evil parted Adam and Eve from Paradise."

"She can not part us, Parker," said Virginia, softly, though she was alarmed; for it seemed, looking at him, as though there was a freshly dug grave at her feet, and that the strange aroma of the thrown-up earth penetrated her senses till it made her faint and sick. Was not death written on that brow, so beautiful and white?

"I tell you it is for nothing else, Virginia. I can read her. There is speculation in her eyes. She prices your beauty, charm by charm, and sets it opposite figures. She is a mercer in flesh and blood, Virginia; she will sell you—oh!—sell you."

Virginia grew giddy; the vehemence of his words—the weight his soul's anguish gave the syllables, oppressed her, hung on her heart. Still she seemed to have little to say, though she felt to the very core of her being.

"I can't lose you, love."

Her hand clasped his arm more tightly at sound of this wailing cry. How this man did love her.

"Parker, what shall I do? counsel me. She will take my mother—I never could let her go without me, even if I was independent of Florida, which, alas! I am not. I wish I could—I wish"—her very powerlessness left her without heart to conjecture or even to wish.

"I'll tell you, Virginia. There is no other way to check this woman's wild, imperious ambition—we must be married, Virginia."

"Parker!" With crimsoned cheeks that rivaled his own, she recoiled from him for a brief moment—then drew near again, and hid her face on his own.

"Yes, Virginia. I have never spoken of it, but we might as well be frank now as we have ever been. I love you—only Heaven knows how well! You are as my life, my very soul, to me. Without hope and faith in you, I should die in a week, I know I should, so strangely am I constituted. Do not fear but what I can take care of you, dearest—and you shall not leave your mother. I have an offer still open to take charge of the second department in a large public-school in the city. I have hesitated because I preferred a smaller salary and the sight of your dear face. Come, Virginia, let us outwit this dragon—the wicked, wicked woman who wants to sell my life—ruin me."

"I must think of it, Parker," said Virginia, tremblingly yet not unwillingly.

"We shall always be together then, darling, we can defy Florida. All day I shall toil like a hero for my blessed little wife, and, when I come home, Virginia, then—then for the book! How I shall write, you beside me—your clear eyes to look into as in wells, from which I shall draw up such lovely images. Then, sometime the book will be finished, a publisher found—it will come out, shining in gold, my name and yours, too, inside—for, to you shall I dedicate it—and, oh! how sweet! think, dearest, think—it will be 'to my wife!' Oh, Virginia! I need to feed on nothing but thought to-day."

They had reached a spot where two roads branched off. The roses shone through dew-drops, and the grass seemed like fine sprays of emerald. An old man sat sunning himself at the foot of a great oak tree whose roots, sinuously bending, formed natural branches. It was Uncle Barby.

"This is one of the Lord's finest mornings, sir," said the old man, who had unbounded reverence for the "clergy" and all "scolards," and lifted himself up with difficulty that he might not seem wanting in respect.

"Don't rise, Uncle Barby, don't rise," said Parker solicitously.

"Lord bless you; my limbs is never got over the rheumatics I took in Jarsey," said the old man, breathing heavily—"for which," he added a mo-

ment after, as if he had forgotten something, "the Lord make us all abundantly thankful."

Parker smiled.

"You're goin' to the school'us I take it," queried the old man.

"Yes, uncle—to teach the young idea how to shoot," was the smiling reply.

"Don't, don't," cried Uncle Barby; "human critters never *was* made to shoot anyway. If you'd had a brother shot down by your side, and seen your own flesh and blood and brains, as it was, spattered onto you, you'd never want to hear or speak of shootin' agen, I reckon—however, praise the Lord!"

"That was only a figure of speech, Uncle Barby," said Parker, "comparing the young mind to a young tree, you know, shooting up in the air."

"Oh! ha—well, yes, but I thought *trees* growed; howsoever, you're ahead o' me in larnin' if you're behind me in years, bless the good Lord!"

In the back-ground stood several young girls, among them Madge Spicer.

Her face took on a look of spiteful, jealous interest, as the young schoolmaster advanced, Virginia now loitering a little in the rear, conscious that the eyes of many were upon them. The vengeful-looking girl, Madge Spicer, seemed ready to burst with rage, as she turned to enter the low-roofed school-house. It was so easy to interpret the teacher's glance of worship, bent upon Virginia—it was so hard for him to forbear aiding her tenderly up the flight of rude steps.

"Anybody could tell," whispered the mischievous girls, with winks and shrugs. "Madge is a capital barometer."

The girl seemed more than usually evil-minded, to-day, and but for the beautiful hope that filled the mind of the young teacher with vague but delicious picture-dreams of the future, he had been all but beside himself. As it was, the fatal flame mounted his cheeks, his forehead, at every repetition of an intentional insult, until at last, with one blaze of resentment making him seem all fire, he exclaimed, resolutely, almost fiercely:

"Madge Spicer—you may go home!"

The girl turned fiercely—her eyes glittered like those of a snake, her brow contracted. The command had petrified her for the instant.

"Perhaps it is not necessary, but I will repeat it—Miss Madge Spicer is dismissed from this school. Her conduct is unbearable, and I shall no longer submit to the degrading effect of her example upon the rest of the pupils."

"What, sir—me—sir?" gasped the girl, her face, neck and arms reddening.

"You may go home," was the calm reply.

"I won't," shouted the rebellious girl.

"Very well, whether you stay or go, you have disgraced yourself," said Parker. The pupils looked on in breathless amazement, wondering how the contest would end. Madge glared round defiantly, then meeting the now pitying eye of Virginia, she sprang toward her like a fury, and, giving way to her ungovernable passion, seized her by the shoulder, screaming all manner of revengeful epithets, and shaking the little figure that had gathered itself back against the wall, a terror in her eyes—her folded hands uplifted.

It was but the work of a moment. Amid the cries of fright and of indignation, Parker hurried forward, pinioned the girl's arms to her side, and quietly carried her, struggling and screaming as she was, to the door, where he calmly set her down outside, and came back trembling with excitement from head to foot.

The window was dashed open. A face distorted with rage—a demon looking out over the barriers of an evil soul—appeared, defiant.

"You keep school here no longer, sir," shouted a hoarse, unnatural voice, as the pale master—now how deadly pale, turned that way. "I'll have you disgraced to-morrow—you'll keep school nowhere, after this—your character is ruined. Everybody knows you, and Virginia Owen, too—the bold, for-

ward creature!" she cried, shrilly. "See how you'll suffer for this!"

A little knot of sympathizing girls had gathered about the half-fainting Virginia.

"We all know what a fury she is! don't feel so badly about it—she's always making mischief," said one.

"No, no—don't mind it," whispered another; "she's not worth minding; if you could see how wretchedly the master looks!"

They had touched the right chord. The color came back to Virginia's cheek, her eyes brightened, then saddened as it traveled toward Parker, who was as much surprised at the effect of the insubordination as he was grieved at the insult offered Virginia. His breath came in gasps—his heart beat so violently that it swayed his slight form back and forth—a suffocating pressure on his chest made his brain giddy.

Well for him that he did not see the consequences that were shortly to ensue.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET WEDDING.

THERE is a figure creeping stealthily but rapidly from the cottage-door. Under the edges of a large mantle the hem of a snow-white dress may be seen. Sometimes turning warily, the figure stops with watchful glances—then tremblingly gathers the mantle closer, and hurries down the road. The path is closed in, shortly, by pine trees, yet still, over the soft carpet of mosses and glossy green leaves crumbling to mold even in their beauty, the little feet are tracing their way. Again it is seen, that slight form, emerging on the pretty green opposite the minister's house. The parsonage is a small edifice, very modest and unpretending, like its occupant.

A timid hand touches the brass knocker. Almost before the first gentle blow has traveled into the hall, the door is thrown aside—there is a quick movement—and—nobody stands outside.

You can almost hear it all—there is such a silence everywhere. The very forest has forgotten its whispered vespers to-night. The great hill, blue at the top—purpling, deepening into huge ridges, ink-black at the bottom, seems listening; so do the trees—those grand elms, swaying forward so gently. There are kind words, then a prayer, then a benediction.

What can it be? Ah! the table is divested of its snowy napkins, and there glisten the frostings of a wedding-cake. And she, standing so droopingly, yet withal very happy, the white dress falling in exquisite folds to the floor, the two hands clasped over somebody's arm—that is Virginia. And he on whom the benignant eyes of the pastor beam so kindly, yet pityingly, noting the hectic, the wonderful brilliancy of eye and smile, the quite little maneuverings to hide the tokens of disease—that is the youthful schoolmaster. Oh! how beautiful they are!—she with that strangely transparent fairness that the old painters gloried in with exultant pride when they caught the tints on canvas—the luminous eyes shedding their amber light into cheeks and lips, making a glory, that at times seemed almost a transfiguration.

"My darling, God bless you;" whispered the elder's wife, coming forward, her open arms extended.

Virginia scarcely knew why she did so; it was a sudden impulse born of the yearning for a mother's sweet presence; but she fell with a sob upon that gentle bosom, and there the good woman gathered and held her as she wept softly—so softly! speaking words of comfort, for she knew that her home life was not a happy one—and who, looking at one of them, certainly, could feel much faith for the future, however earnestly hope might mingle in the fear.

There was but little eaten, little drank. No one tried to be merry, though there was no lack of sweet smiles and pleasant words. Then came a

fervent good-night—the two newly wedded were threading again the forest-path, now laced with slender, quivering beams of pale moonlight. They talked little, but when they spoke it was rapidly—on his side passionate words of endearment.

"And now those walls will hide you from my sight for a while," said the young man, while she stood as if ready to spring toward their shelter. "You will surely keep our secret as long as we remain here, dearest?"

"I will try to," whispered Virginia, one moment clinging to his hand, the next starting forward.

"Why need you hurry so, darling? The house is quite dark—Florida can not have returned."

"Oh, Parker! let me go—I could not bear her anger to-night of all times, and her very eyes would turn to tongues—I never could endure her to see me."

"Then, good-night again, and God bless you, my own—my wife!"

The lights are all out as Virginia enters the quaint little hall and softly feels her way up the stairs. There is a rustle in her chamber while she stands on the threshold—a light suddenly gleams in the darkness, and there is Florida, a hard, cold look in her brilliant eyes, her black cape and somber bonnet not yet removed.

Poor Virginia! The child droops forward, her cheeks one moment all scarlet, the next death-white, as she stammers, "I thought—you—"

"Thought I was out—and so I was till a moment ago; you see I have not yet taken off my things"—the lips curl into a smile, the eyes glitter. "And you, it seems, have taken the same opportunity to visit somebody. Why, child, you are all dressed in white—quite a bridal style upon my word! Where have you been?"

"I—I—" the words die upon her lips.

"If you were going to a party, I don't know why you should keep it a secret from me—I do believe you are afraid of me, Virginia."

"Oh, no!"—the quiet manner of her sister quite deceives her—"Oh, no!—but I thought as—that is—to-night, I would not tell any one."

"Don't, for pity's sake, be so secretive again, then. Come here—why, how very pretty you look! White ribbons—where did you get them? Beautiful!"

"Mother gave them to me," stammers Virginia, still confused.

"Suppose this were white brocade, now,"—she takes the muslin up with a contemptuous touch—"and this, the rich lace of the German looms. Suppose pearls or diamonds encircled these pretty wrists, and glorious gems shone on this bosom—while one of the bridal veils that we have heard of fell in gleaming folds from these curls to the floor. Some time I hope I shall see you dressed thus; it would be a much prettier bridal robe than this."

Virginia catches her breath; does this strange, witch-like woman know that this is indeed her bridal dress, her bridal night? What shall she say or do? how fathom the deep, dark depths of her designs?

"I never wish to wear a better dress than this in all my life," she says, half passionately.

"Oh! yes you will—when you are married"—and the glance she meets causes the blood to rush over neck, arms and brow.

"But now let us talk of other things, and then to bed; we have so much to do, to-morrow, we need all the rest we can get. Come—how strangely you stand there, looking at me! What do you want? Shall I help you?"

"No!"—and Virginia turns away, feeling tears upon her lashes, and, biting her lips, strives to choke down the struggling sobs. She feels so helpless and yet defiant—almost ready to fly from this roof and seek that of one who she trusts, is now her protector—and still a thousand fears deter her. The past few hours seem dream-like—can it be possible that she had taken new duties, great responsibilities upon her? That in her keeping the happiness of a human being is placed? that she is no longer

to live for herself? that a mysterious union exists between her soul and that of another which nothing but death can annihilate? And Florida, moving round in her cool, determined way, does she suspect? It would be just like her to know all about it and never give a sign. However, she has *some* spirit, thank God! A worm will turn, and her ordinary meekness shall not master her. She will not tell unless she is forced—and yet, how is it to be known? It must be, before a great while; but till the necessity comes, there will be time enough. Meanwhile—

"I have engaged rooms," says Florida, "in a quiet, out of the way court—a genteel place, too. For a time we must depend on sewing, which a friend will furnish us. You remember Johnny McKnight, don't you?"

Yes, Virginia recollects the red-headed, gawky country-lad, who left the village three years ago.

"Well—he has a splendid situation in a large tailoring establishment, and will give us plenty of work. How fortunate that I learned a trade! You will not need one; but for all that you can help me while I am looking round."

"I hate sewing," says Virginia, under her breath.

"Oh, well, *you* won't have to sew a great while."

"Why! pray what are you going to do with me?" asks Virginia, suddenly turning round.

"What you will thank me for," is the reply.

Virginia would answer, but Florida, with her quick step and quicker motion, is gone before there is opportunity, and Virginia, alone, trembling, almost repents of the step she has taken.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SCHOOLMASTER'S PRESENTIMENT.

"You haven't seemed a bit like yourself to-day, Virginia—what is the matter? You needn't start like a culprit, child!"

"I—oh! nothing," replied the other, sitting back again to her sewing; but the crimson that sprang from cheek to cheek, and the trembling fingers told another story.

Florida has been bustling about in her energetic way—putting the touch of improvement wherever it was needed, throwing over the dullness of antiquated varnish a polish that seemed to emanate from her ever restless fingers, making all things ready for the moving, and talking, now to her sister, now to herself.

"If she wishes to be rich and great," said Virginia to herself looking half proudly upon the brilliant, glowing face whose beauty wore an air so regal, "why doesn't she plan for herself and let me alone?"

"Since nothing is the matter, then, you had better come out of dream-land and tell me whom we ought to invite to tea on Wednesday," resumed Florida.

"To tea—on Wednesday?" repeated Virginia.

"That's what I said. Before we go, I am thinking it would be best to have a little company—a sort of festival. I have been waiting to invite the minister and his wife, for some time, and you've been wanting to invite the schoolmaster—and his wife, I was going to say," she added, with a strange laugh, "but that would be anticipating the matter."

Virginia's glance fell.

"I don't see what you want a festival for," she said, "for my part, I don't see anything very festive in our going away—that is—" encountering the keen, dark eye of Florida, she blushed and stammered again.

"How queerly you act, Virginia," said Florida, after enjoying her confusion for some moments. "Is your mind burdened? If so, as our good father Burdick says, 'Speak out, sister, speaking may relieve you.' At any rate, I'm going to have the company," she said, after a pause, "and if you wish me to invite Parker Welliston, say so."

"I—I should like it," said Virginia.

"Well, write the note of invitation yourself—he is your teacher."

The request did not need to be repeated. Florida went out in the afternoon and invited several neighbors, while Virginia dispatched a neatly-written note to the teacher. She had not met Parker since the hour of the ceremony that had so eventfully changed her fate, and the certainty of seeing him threw her into a tremor of anxiety and expectation. How should she meet him, all eyes upon her? What should she say to him? It was impossible to accost him in the cold, calm tones of friendship—her very voice would betray her, especially under the scrutinizing glance of her sister. Since then he had been in the city, and had probably returned on this very morning with, perhaps, news that would justify her in announcing her marriage. Florida's exclamation that she had not seemed like herself was true. She had, indeed, for the last week, appeared a different being. An air of timid sadness hung over her—her cheeks were unusually pale and her manner hurried and somewhat nervous. She could not employ herself with any continuous work, but went restlessly from one occupation to another, oftener standing in an absent, listless way and thinking, than doing any real business, save when Florida was near. Then she seemed to feel the necessity of employment to divert her sister's ever-watchful eyes, and labored with a will. She could not tell, with her utmost vigilance ever on the alert, whether Florida suspected the truth. If she did, surely never more consummate actor than she. If she did not, Virginia dreaded the revelation.

Madge Spicer had busied herself in circulating the most injurious reports of the schoolmaster, and her father threatened him with expulsion. Mr. Spicer was a power in the place. His wealth was enormous, and, being an uncultivated man, he was not over courteous in his wrath. If it had not been that the majority of the citizens, who heard the true version from the pupils, and who knew that Madge possessed her father's violent temper, expressed their conviction of the young teacher's justice in language not to be misunderstood, the father of Madge could have gone back to the schoolmaster, and, as he expressed himself, "whipped the life out of him." As it was, he contented himself with trying so to control events that the place would be uneasy to that degree that Parker would leave to save himself. The latter, however, had managed to forestall the vindictive farmer, and on this his week of vacation, had secured the vacancy in the large city-school.

How bright the little cottage looked to Virginia, now that she was to leave it, perhaps forever! It seemed strange to her that her mother, who had spent so many happy years within the humble walls, should babble her childish pleasure at the prospective change. She was sure the dear old furniture would never look as well in any other place, and oh! how she should miss the broad expanse of blue and green! Then she consoled herself with the reflection that Parker might get a situation, Florida be reconciled, and they could all stay happily together. The city would not be so gloomy then—how could any place seem gloomy and Parker there? Florida kept her very busy for the rest of the day. There was cream to whip, cake to be made, and various delicacies conjured up for the coming festive occasion, so that Virginia had little time for solitary thought before the day was done. Then she threw on her hat, and with heightened color prepared for a walk.

"Out on one of your old rambles, I suppose," said Florida, meeting her at the door. "I beg you won't stay late; it is very damp out, and I have particular reasons for wishing you to be careful of your health."

"What can she mean?" queried Virginia, as she ran along the little path that led to the wood. "Why is she so unusually solicitous about me? She never was before. It is impossible that she knows—it must be. She thinks to make a match for me in the city—she is laying her plans accordingly. Well, let her plan; I know something that will outwit even her."

Her pace grew slower—a dread she had never felt before came over her; she almost wished he might not be in the old place. It was an experience so novel that she could not reconcile herself to it. There was a step—yes, he was looking for her—he was near her, close by her side. Nothing was felt now save the joy of meeting.

"My darling! my own! my wife!" he whispered, passionately, kisses falling between the words.

"Oh, Parker! I have been so unhappy without you!" she cried, almost hysterically.

"And so have I, away from you, my dearest," replied the young man, who, feeling that success had crowned his endeavors, never had seemed so brilliantly beautiful before; "but then I have been gone for some purpose. Now I can claim you—now you are no longer in the power of that splendid ogress, Miss Florida the indomitable. Come, our old seat is waiting for us."

They sat down together, she feeling that all the happiness of her life had been as nothing to the ecstasy that thrilled her beside him. Yes, Florida should acknowledge that her choice was a wise one. He to whom she had given her heart and soul, would yet electrify the world by his genius. With beautiful eagerness she scanned the face that hope had made so brilliant. Surely it was like no other human countenance. The eyes so luminous with soul—the vivid crimson of the cheeks, like, yet unlike, the blush of a gentle woman—the firm, beautifully-curved lips—and the rich abundance of waving hair that, with a poet's conceit, he allowed to fall upon his shoulders. Oh! yes, she might look the world through and not find his equal.

"Well, and what have our old friends been doing—particularly my favorite, Miss Judge Spicer?" he asked, with a light laugh. "Of course she don't intend to let me alone. What will she say when she hears the news, I wonder?"

"I don't dare to think of it," said Virginia, with burning cheeks. "Of course you know she will try to injure you."

"Let her," he replied; "I defy her power now—I'm safe. But about Florida—what are her plans?"

Virginia detailed them.

"Good! So I'm invited to tea, am I?—that is, I suppose, to honey and milk, to say nothing of the matter of your sweet presence. What do you think, Virginia, of my claiming you then and there?"

"Oh, no, no!" Virginia shrunk away.

"Oh, yes, yes!" He laughed a light, happy laugh—then sprang to his feet with a violent exclamation of pain.

"Parker, are you ill?" cried Virginia.

"It is nothing"—his hand pressed heavily against his side—"nothing, but—I could never be convivial. Strange, is it not? Whenever I laugh with any degree of heartiness, this terrible pain shoots through—literally tears through my side. Now, I have frightened you, timid one. I assure you it is all over, and I am as well as ever."

"Are you certain?"

"Very certain—don't think of it again. It is, I suppose, constitutional. I remember my mother was troubled with it."

"Your mother! she is not living, is she?" queried Virginia.

"No." Why did the crimson rush to the very roots of his hair? "She died years ago—not with disease though—she was killed with care and trouble."

"You remember her? or did she die before you were grown?"

"Remember her!" he cried, with a passionate energy that sent the blood rushing over his face again.

"Ay, I do remember her. Virginia, I can not tell you how beautiful and loving she was. You, more than any woman I have ever seen, remind me of her. My poor, suffering angel-mother!"

Some sudden emotion overpowered him; he covered his face with his hands. His frame trembled.

"Did your father die before her?"

Simple and natural as the question was, Virginia

had cause to regret it. He turned sharply round, his face as deathly white as it had been crimson before.

"Why did you ask that, Virginia?" His voice sounded unnaturally deep.

"I'm sure I don't know," she answered, half crying.

"My father—is not dead," he said, in a hoarse voice.

Virginia dared not trust herself to reply.

"And more, Virginia—that we may not speak of it again—never, never again!" he added, bitterly—"I do not know my father; whether or not he knows me, I can not tell. He"—his face was turned partly away, his tones were low and rapid—"he deserted my mother. Great Heaven! that I should live to tell any other than *him*! Oh! could I but see him now—face to face—the base, unnatural—villain!" he added, after a second, as if he were seeking for a word that would express his utter and entire abhorrence.

"Virginia," he said, in a softer voice, "the last recollection I have of my poor mother is this: A low-ceiled garret, overlooking dingy walls; a miserable bed, poorly furnished, on which she lay, gasping for breath. Poverty and sorrow had eaten into her vitals. She hungered—while he—oh, God!—I should not have ventured so far. It is like tearing soul from body—worse than the agony of death!"

"Parker, what have I done? It was my thoughtlessness; but how could I know? Forgive me!"

"For what? Your questions were natural—but the past swept over me like a surging wave. I felt—forgive *me*—as if some one might have come between us—might have endeavored, with false stories, to alienate my darling. I know the strong prejudices of these New England people—and—but I was wrong, was I not, Virginia?"

He took her hands; his own were cold and shaking. Virginia knew not what to think. Her mind was bewildered.

"Virginia, no one has spoken against me?" he said, almost breathlessly.

"No one," she replied.

"Then, thank God, my impression was a false one. I was not born here, Virginia. I never told you, I think."

"You never did."

"No—one of those far-off West India islands was the place of my birth, but I was brought to America when very young. My mother lived till I was thirteen. Then, through the kindness of a friend, I was sent to school. Oh! to be motherless, friendless, with a soul so keenly alive to those petty insults experienced always by the timid school-boy whose mother's smile has been his heaven! Virginia, you have felt the loss of a kind father, but you had still something to lean on—your mother was left. If she is your idol, as was mine, then you have a blessing in the midst of every grief. Virginia, are you superstitious?"

The question was asked after a thoughtful silence. There were tears in the eyes of the listener—she would not wipe them away for fear of causing him regret that he had told her some part of his life-history. She pined—she longed to comfort him.

"Am I superstitious? I don't know but I am, sometimes."

"Do you know at this moment I have the strangest impression? It seems to me as if you were going to be taken away from me."

"Oh no, no—never! don't think that—you chill me!" she cried, throwing herself nearer and within his encircling arms.

"I wonder what it is that comes over me at times—such a cloud, pressing me down! But I will not give way to it—it is cruel in me to make this, our first meeting, so sad. How has it happened? I never felt more joyous than when we met. Some dark spirit is present."

"Parker! now I do believe you are superstitious! no darker spirit than your own fears will trouble us—no darker spirit than Florida ever vexes me."

so strange, so unreal, that I seem to fear, dislike and love her at the same time. She has some noble attributes; but then she can make one so thoroughly uncomfortable with a look. As for your impressions and pre-occupations, they may be, after all, only the bugbears of an excited fancy. Come, tell me—what did you have for dinner?"

"Toast, tea, and two ripe peaches," he answered, laughingly.

"And for supper?"

"Sweet smiles, a soft voice, and two clear, brown eyes looking into mine, with an occasional kiss," he answered, merrily, his spirits rising.

"Oh, Parker! then you have not been to supper at all!"

"On the contrary, I insist that I am full-fed; my appetite would not bear a rose-leaf," he asserted. "The truth is, I could not look at food, I so longed for a look of your sweet face. I sup now, celestially."

"I think you would fare better on something more substantial," replied Virginia, in the same laughing tone. "You had better go to tea—and I home. Florida will need me."

"Still tied to Florida. Well, I will not cut the apron-strings till I can claim you, as I will on Wednesday. Then everything can be arranged. You will go to the city on the following day, of course."

"Yes—we shall leave that dear home—this pleasant place. It almost breaks my heart to think of it."

"Do you regret it so much?"

"Not if you go with me," she whispered softly.

"Only two hours," Florida said, glancing at the clock, as Virginia entered. "You must have had a pleasant time. Did you call anywhere?"

"I met a friend," said Virginia quietly.

"Oh! a dear friend, I presume. Is the schoolmaster at home?"

"Yes." This time Virginia looked full in her sister's face. Florida met the glance with something like surprise.

"I supposed so," she replied. "By the way, I've a long story to tell of him, but I will postpone it till some future time. I am going to the city to-morrow."

"To the city! I thought you could not go till Thursday."

"And so I shall not—that is, to take mother and you—the goods and chattels; but I have received letters to-night that make the duty imperative."

Virginia did not mind; other matters claimed all her thought. She sat down to her knitting, after visiting her mother's bedside to see if she slept well, and hardly thought of Florida. But, as her busy fingers flew, her thoughts grew confused. It seemed as if some irresistible impression drew her toward Florida. She turned slowly and in a sort of maze, and beheld the large, glowing eyes of her half-sister, larger, brighter than ever, fastened upon her with a sort of hungry, eager glance.

"What did you look at me for?" queried the latter, a flash of triumph and a peculiar smile crossing her face.

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Virginia, who was in a vague wonderment. "I felt as if I must, that was all; but you were looking at me."

"Your slow movement made me," said Florida, the strange smile not yet gone from her lips. "I was busy with my book before. Are you frightened?"

Virginia laughed a little as she resumed her knitting.

"Frightened—no," she said, and yet she wondered what had come over Florida. That she was not like herself she had seen in that glance. There was an air almost exultant—the bearing was more queenly than ever—the red lips worked restlessly. A perceptible uneasiness destroyed the self-poise so remarkable in her usual manner. She kept her eyes fixed upon the book, smiling now and then to herself. At last, rising, she left the room. Some moments passed, and Virginia wonder-

ed whether she would return. It was late—nearly ten—a late hour for the cottage inmates, and the candle was burned almost close to the socket. Virginia prepared to put her work aside. Smiling a bright, secret, hopeful smile, she arose and threw the loose curls from her temples. Quietly moving to the place occupied so recently by Florida, she cast a glance toward the book. It was a volume she had never seen before.

"I wonder what it is?" she queried to herself, and turned the pages, running their headings over in a low voice: "Fascination—Attraction! Animal Magnetism! The Magnetic Force in Metals! What a queer taste!" she ejaculated; "but she is strange in everything."

Three little raps sounded at the window. Startled, for her nerves were not on the nicest balance, she turned toward the sound, and there saw a face looking in—pale but beautiful. Springing forward she opened the window.

"Darling, you see how I dread to lose sight of you," said Parker. "I have been watching here almost since your return. Don't be frightened, there's a stationary light up at the window of the ogress. I wish I could see you to-morrow."

"You can, Parker. Florida is going to the city."

"And, of course will stay all day. Oh! darling, what a happy time we'll have! We'll be two children and play keep house."

"Go away, you silly boy," said Virginia, blushing and laughing, and still looking over her shoulder.

"You forget my new dignity, madam. Mrs. Virginia, if you please, I am a married man."

"Oh! the ideal!" laughed Virginia. "But, Parker, do go—Florida would think it so improper."

"Florida may go to—Florida," he retorted with merry impatience. "Have you a butterfly's joint that you could broil in a minute or two? I feel hungry."

"Poor fellow!—but then it's your own fault. You'll have to fast now, unless I can get you a glass of milk and a wafer."

"No, no—I was only jesting. By the way what book was that I saw you buried in—or rather that I saw Florida buried in, and you skimmed over? You did not look particularly pleased with it."

"It is nothing I care about or understand," replied Virginia. "Some work on some science, about magnetism and metals, I believe."

"Magnetism—hem!" he said, smiling to himself. "She's a tremendous magnet, of one kind. I shouldn't want her to hate me very much, or love ditto."

"Hush! for mercy's sake, don't let her hear you. Are you aware that it is getting late, my young friend, and that at such an hour the schoolmaster should not be abroad?"

"The schoolmaster will not be abroad much longer," said Parker, catching her hand and holding it to his lips. "Wait a day or two, and I'll carry you off in triumph; then see if you dare say saucy words to me when I am your lord and master."

"Virginia!" was heard from the top of the stairs. "Is there a window open?"

"I'm just closing it, Florida," said Virginia, hardly able to speak for laughing at the pantomimic gestures of Parker outside, and yet feeling a sort of half-guilty terror, mingled with admiration of the face now fading into the darkness.

"The draught was terrible," said Florida, as Virginia made her appearance. "Why in the world did you want the window open now? Were you moon-gazing?"

"I didn't know there was a moon," said Virginia, pausing aghast, as she saw her half-sister on her knees before a great camphor-chest, unrolling bundles of old papers that looked as if they had never seen daylight, and very rarely any other. "Why, what are you doing?"

"Looking for some documents of importance," said Florida, rising and placing a stained pile on the table beside her. "Now I am going to get every-

thing ready for my journey to-morrow, for I must start at six."

Virginia's heart gave a great bound of relief at the prospect of a whole day to herself. She quietly hummed a little air as she adjusted her hair for the night.

"I always had an impression," said Florida, in slow, even tones, "that I should be rich yet."

"I'm sure I hope you will," responded Virginia.

"And for yourself—have you no ambition?" queried Florida, turning half round.

"Not to be rich," replied Virginia. "I don't think I've any taste for splendor or show of any kind. I should always be contented to live in this dear little cottage."

"You think so now, but wait awhile. You will be as fond of pleasure, even of gildings and trappings, by and by, as any one. You don't know yourself, Virginia. Wait till you stand where I can place you—it will be a giddy height, but I'm not afraid of your falling."

Virginia suspended operations to gaze upon Florida. Her manner so absolute in its self-command—her voice so even in its low, firm notes—her air, regal as that of a princess, and correspondingly patronizing as she seemed to look down upon Virginia, quite bewildered the young girl. Surely Florida was in a strange mood, for, pausing a moment, she took Virginia by the hand, and, without speaking, led her to the old mirror.

Conscious of the wonderful beauty that there gazed at her with startled eyes, with a dim perception, also, of her half-sister's motive, Virginia blushed and smiled.

"There, child, you see what you are, and what I think of you," said Florida. "Now go to sleep and dream as strange things as you may. I will show you something stranger when you are wide awake some day." And with this quaint prophecy ringing in her ears, Virginia sought her rest.

CHAPTER VIII.

A VISIT TO THE LAWYER—A HAPPY DAY.

The next day Virginia was awakened by an impatient call. It was scarcely light, but, remembering what was before her, she sprang hastily up. Florida was already dressed, and held a packed carpet-bag in one hand and a bonnet in the other.

"I thought you had best get up, for I've made the fire," she said. "Of course you'll attend to mother, and to getting all the meals."

"You needn't expect me home till after dark, to-night, for I have a great deal to do. Good-morning, now you are thoroughly roused."

Another moment, and Florida and carpet-bag were both gone.

It was a walk of nearly an hour to reach the place for which the coach started on its ten miles' jaunt. The air was cool, and the drops lay like showers of silver on the path by the house, and covered the fields far and near with a white splendor. Florida walked on with a quick step and an animated face. She did not heed the faint twittering of the birds, now few in number, (for the fall had set in,) nor the soft flushing of crimson just lighting up the westward gates, where the sun was preparing to enter. It was not the glory of nature that gave her face such an exultant beauty, but ever and anon she would glance at the carpet-bag in her hand, and murmur, "I knew it would come some time."

The humble tavern in which the post-office was kept soon came in sight. A few persons stood on the steps, talking sleepily, and watching the motions of a lazy hostler, whose steps were as uncertain as his temper. The men moved respectfully aside as Florida came in sight, and she entered the little room set apart for the reception of letters.

"Good-morning, marm," said the postmaster, landlord of the "Irving." "It's a right pleasant day before us, I guess."

"I should judge so," said Florida, coldly.

"There's a furren letter come for you last night, postmarked London, England. I sent my boy right

away with it—r's'pose you got it last night with two other letters."

"I received them all, replied Florida.

"Tain't often furren letters from such a long distance comes to this office," said the landlord, evidently longing for some inkling of their contents—but he was doomed to disappointment. Florida preserved a dignified silence, and frowned at the man's impertinence. It seemed an unreasonably long time till the coach was ready, but at last the driver mounted the steps, reins in hand, Florida was helped in, and away rattled the old stage, almost the only one that railroads had not superseded in that section of the country.

The drive was a rapid but agreeable one; several ladies took the route at different points, and all were affable and conversational but Florida. She seemed wrapped in a pleasant, but, at the same time, far-off reverie, and did not notice the questioning glances of her companions, who wondered who that proud, beautiful creature could be. At last the vehicle rattled over the stony streets. Florida was set down at the destination of the coach, and, after a few minutes of rest, took her way to the central part of the city.

Walking rapidly onward, she did not pause till she found herself opposite a block of tall houses, ornamented with scores of signs set off by fiery colors. Attorneys at law, judges of courts, private offices of banks and railroads, conglomerated in gilded confusion. Seeking for the name to which she had been directed, she was soon seated in a handsome office, waiting for the lawyer who was in rapid conversation behind his desk curtain. Presently two gentlemen emerged from the niche in which the desk was placed. One of them was a thin, saw-toothed man, her lawyer; the other was tall, portly and very handsome, though apparently over forty. Both started slightly, and gazed, and bowed with some confusion, the latter stealing glances at the dignified, dark-eyed woman who sat as if conscious of deserved homage, and, with wonderful self-possession, sustained the surprised and admiring looks directed toward her.

"Good-morning, Mr. Burney," said the tall gentleman, as if suddenly becoming conscious of the fact that his business was over. He took a few steps, made a half-bow to the stranger, and vanished through the double baize-door.

"This is Mr. Burney, I presume?"

The lawyer bent his head in acknowledgment.

"I received a letter from you last evening. I am Miss Florida Owen, the daughter of Charles Wiston Owen, of Wiltshire, England."

"Ah!" the lawyer's face grew all alight. "I remember—the brother of Charles deceased, and left a large fortune. His lawyer immediately placed the business partly in my hands—he is a cousin of mine. I congratulate you, Miss Owen. But, I understand that Mr. Charles Wiston Owen had left a widow."

"He has, sir; she is, however, most of the time, bed-ridden, and so far gone in intellect, in consequence of protracted illness, that she is wholly inadequate to the transaction of business. I came myself, partly to consult you on that account, and to see if any means could be taken that would put the burden of the trouble upon me, who am so much more able to bear it."

"Is your mother incapable of signing her name?" asked the lawyer.

"I do not know, indeed, sir. It is now seven years that she has been nearly helpless."

"Your best method, then, would be to lay the matter before her, when she would undoubtedly be willing that you take the responsibility off her hands. There are, however, very few steps to be taken to put you in possession of this fortune. There is no need of rehearsing what I stated in my letter. You can probably procure your mother's marriage-certificate, and, if possible, that of your father's mother, or documents equivalent."

"I have them all here," said Florida, pointing to her carpet-bag.

The lawyer smiled. "You have more forethought than some ladies," he said. "This business does not create any symptoms of nervousness, I see. Be kind enough to let me examine the papers."

An hour passed, and still Florida sat absorbed in the work before her. She had listened to explanations and advice; she had heard the story of her uncle's death, his lonely state—his want of friends—for an aversion of disposition had shut out sympathy from him to an unwonted degree; she had learned, also, that the fortune amounted to forty thousand pounds sterling, after all the expenses of transit, travel and fees should be paid—and there she sat, as calm, as apparently unconcerned, as if the matter were of scarcely any moment to her. The lawyer was lost in admiration, and said to himself: "She is precisely the woman to whom such a fortune should come—able to cope with adversity, able to bear prosperity."

"I beg your pardon," said a bland voice, and the stranger, who had been closeted with the lawyer some time before, entered, his keen orbs encountering the dark eyes of Florida. "I beg your pardon, Burney, but I left my cane, I believe," he said, coming forward. "I'm the most careless mortal."

"Yes, yes; like all men on the look-out for a wife," said the lawyer, laughing. "Yes, there it is in the corner; I see the gold head peeping up. Good-morning. One of our millionaires," he added, in an aside to his visitor, as the gentleman again left the office.

Florida smiled, and immediately took up the point they had left in their conversation.

"It seems perfectly clear to me, now," she said, quietly, "and I shall act upon your advice. I have been thinking, ever since last fall, of moving to the city. I engaged a few rooms, appropriate to our position at that time, which of course I shall now give up; but I can not relinquish my plan of moving to the city. Still, I do not wish, yet, to undergo the trouble of house-hunting and furnishing. Is there any plan you can think of that would not involve this care—a house ready furnished, for instance, that I could occupy for a while?"

"Really, I don't know," mused the lawyer, who did not feel time hang heavy in conversation with so sensible, beautiful and business-like a woman. "Yes, I have it! I have it!" he repeated, striking his palms softly together. "My friend, Mr. Horace Dudley, is on the eve of a journey to England—expects to be from home a year. He is at this very time on the look-out for a housekeeper, to take charge of his domestic matters while he is gone. Now, it strikes me that he had better let the place to a responsible person who will have an eye to the good of the whole premises."

"Where is the house, sir?"

"In Grand street—and by far the handsomest residence there. It strikes me that, if you did not want the whole, as it is very large, you could accommodate yourself with as much as you need. At any rate, I am quite sure my friend would like the arrangement, and if you wish me to, I will accompany you to his place. It is quite near."

Florida assented with pleasure. The interview resulted in a bargain; the house was at the disposal of Florida. Indeed, from the first moment, Mr. Dudley seemed anxious to accommodate. He appeared struck with Florida's face, and searched his memory, which assured him that they had met before. After the preliminaries were settled, Florida wended her way to certain stores where various elegant goods were on hand, and, by the time she was ready to return her carpet-bag had grown to three large trunks, two handboxes and sundry bundles that caused the driver to exclaim not a little as he stowed them carefully together upon the top of the stage.

Meanwhile, Virginia, totally unconscious of her sister's errand and light-hearted as a bird in her freedom, went merrily about the house. Her mother's breakfast prepared and eaten, she aided her to dress, saw her carefully placed in her wheel-chair, and brought out into the room near the window, her favorite seat.

"Where's Florry, child?" ejaculated the invalid, looking cautiously around.

"She's gone to stay all day, mother dear," said Virginia, gently smoothing back the gray locks.

"Well, there—I'm glad, ain't you?" said the woman, querulously, her face losing a shade of its age. "Jenny, she's a good girl, but she's very odd, isn't she, darling? Never mind the house—do stay with me, my heart's love; do stay with me, won't you?"

"Yes, mother, nearly the whole day, if you like; I must first see to some things, and by-and-by, perhaps, I will bring you some company."

"Company! that will be good. It will seem like old times, won't it, dear? Your father loved to invite his friends home, for I was always ready, and the good man did enjoy it. Who are you going to bring, daughter?"

"You remember the school-teacher, mother?"

"I don't know as I do—yes, yes; that young man with the long hair—oh! yes, I remember. But what is he coming for? Does he love you, child? Does he want to marry you and take you away from your old mother?"

"And if he did, darling mother," said Virginia, hiding her rosy face in her mother's lap, "would you be very sorry?"

"Sorry!"—the mother shook her head with a feeble sigh. "It is so full of care, that life—and oh! the grave, the grave! for death will come—it came to my Thomas, and laid his dear head low. Oh! there are such cares—how can I tell you, my child? And yet, you could not be happy unless—alas! it is hard for a mother to advise her child, knowing how full of thorns are both paths. I don't want to see that pretty face all covered with wrinkles as mine has been so many years. And yet, child, you can't be happy alone—I never could; and there *are* joys, blessed joys! I married my Thomas to help him. Bless his sweet face! I see it now so plainly! Well, we had poverty at the first, but we toiled, and hoped, and prayed together. That is the blessedness, Jenny, my little flower—together. Always be together in heart, word, deed—don't be separate in anything."

Virginia listened in astonishment. Her mother had not seemed so genial, so spirited for years. The weight of Florida's chilling presence being taken away, her heart grew elastic and young again.

For some time the invalid rambled on in this same strain; then she grew silent, and contented herself with watching the landscape, in apparent forgetfulness of all she had said. Virginia, meanwhile, was happy and busy. Every moment she looked for Parker, and her heart gave quicker throbs when she heard his step on the gravel walk fronting the house. She ran down the stairs, and the greeting was what it ever should be between husband and wife, loyal and affectionate.

"How many tons lighter do you feel now?" he asked; "for my part, I am a feather, blown about on the breath of your love. Why! how much we miss the beautiful tiger who cages you up whenever she can get the opportunity. If she came in the door this minute—presto! I should be a stone, a marble heart, a granite column—anything but a happy, loving, breezy man, breezy as the south wind. Now put that odious knitting down; I want to be a tyrant all day—a loving one, you know, and I certainly shall *not* allow you to knit while I am here."

Virginia let fall her hands and looked up helplessly.

"You obey well," he said, smiling in the overflow of his joy till his face took on a heavenly beauty. "Now, to reward you, I will tell you that I have begun that book."

"Oh! have you?" cried Virginia, letting the knitting fall.

"Yes—the title page is written fairly, in my best and boldest hand. I have selected mottoes—begun my Chapter First—in fact now, I think I shall go on swimmingly. Oh, Virginia! your love, I am convinced, will make me immortal."

"You look, now, as if all superstitions, all clouds were gone," said Virginia.

"As if they were not," replied Parker, with much solemnity; "yea, all, as if they had never been. I'm at the very roof-top of the seventh heaven—perfect ecstasy—a jubilation of soul that tells something of its perpetual angelhood and youth. Oh! yes, I am very happy—very happy to-day. Let us see; did I ever know trouble? Strange—it was only yesterday that I was in the fog—I may be in it again to-morrow."

Sometimes we utter unconscious prophecies. For that day, at least, the silver lining was out. They were, in truth, like two children, wild with liberty. They ate ripe fruit, and drank milk together. They passed their future in a few sun-tinted anticipations, for it was as if they lived a long life of happiness in those serene hours. For the poor invalid, also, the day was a most happy one. Her youth seemed to come back to her, for she sang snatches of old songs, and told stories of her brighter days, so that sometimes tears came to the eyes of her listeners. Parker called her mother, and she stroked his head with her soft hand, and, looking in his face, said to herself: "Yes, he shall wed my Virginia—they two are so fitted for each other." As night drew near, they began to expect Florida, and the innocent mirth changed to apprehensive quiet. It was long after twilight that she came, however, driven by a boy in a handsome covered wagon. Parker hurried away by a side-door. Virginia opened her eyes wider than ever at the sight of new trunks. Florida was reserved and fatigued, keeping her own counsel. The trunks were left in the hall. Virginia had been gone up-stairs some time when Florida made her appearance.

"I bought some jellies," she said, holding up glasses beautifully crimsoned; "I knew we had nothing as nice."

"But the expense," cried Virginia.

"Well, they did cost something," Florida responded, smiling quietly. "The fact is, I took a fancy to be a little extravagant, and have bought several things that may lay me liable to the charge of lunacy." Here she produced two traveling-dresses, both of the richest and most costly fabrics.

"Oh, Florida! how beautiful!" cried Virginia, her eyes sparkling.

"Ah! I knew you liked pretty things," said Florida, with meaning voice and glance.

"Of course I like pretty things," spoke up Virginia, with spirit; "I am, however, quite contented with plainer ones."

"We won't argue the question," said Florida. "I am tired—we have so much to do, that it will be wiser for us to retire. I have other nice things to show you to-morrow."

CHAPTER IX.

DISAPPOINTMENT—A TERRIBLE REVELATION.

PARKER walked home on wings. He was almost frightened at his own happiness. "To-morrow," he whispered to himself, "I will claim her—she is mine, beyond all earthly power to separate." He reached the little dingy farm-house where he boarded, and from which he hurried every morning at daybreak, to escape the fumes of pork and sausage that were sure to penetrate to his room, and for both of which he had a lively antipathy. It looked so queer, so black and deserted—not a friendly light to be seen—that he almost dreaded to enter; but presently, laughing off his fears, he vaulted over the fence—his usual way—and, climbing a low shed, opened his window and leaped in. To get a light was the work of a moment. He looked about; on the table lay a note, neatly folded, addressed to himself. Did his sensitive temperament forewarn him that there was trouble there? Certain it is that he folded his arms behind him, and looked long and doubtingly at the missive. "Suppose it should be—" a cold shiver ran through his veins. He had already given warning of his departure, and a master had been engaged for the school in the village. That situation was gone

from him irrevocably, for he knew that the state or feeling toward him in certain quarters was such that even his friends thought the wisest course for him was to resign, although they would not have counseled it unless satisfied that he could do better. At last, determined to know the worst, he snatched the envelope up and tore it open.

Great heavens! did his sight deceive him? The note was from the head committee of the public school in the city, saying that the matter had been reconsidered, and they had decided that he was not the man they needed. They were very sorry, etc., etc., but there were circumstances, etc., etc.; then followed the signature.

"Oh, God! this is too cruel!" gasped the unfortunate young man. "Why am I thus taunted, thus degraded? Some one is at work, bent upon my ruin." He flung the note down, and sobbed like a child. This undue emotion brought on violent pain, and the fever of consumption rioted through his veins, blazing like the signal-fires of death on either cheek.

"I thought it could not last," he groaned, referring to his overflowing happiness; "I felt the sorrow would follow in proportion to the joy. Now, indeed, am I homeless—and how dare I claim Virginia, my wife?"

Paroxysm upon paroxysm of grief surged over his soul. He could not think calmly, could not reason. God had deserted him, and the world was dark, dark as the grave. He longed to die—he was in despair. Not his at all times was that buoyant hope that sinks with the receding wave only to be lifted higher with the next. He could see nothing before him but inadequately paid toil, hardly sufficient to keep life in himself—surely not enough to support a wife. And even that he could not depend upon. Hundreds of sturdy young students, poor as himself, were hunting the country round for opportunities to keep the district-schools. Seldom was there a vacancy. To crown all his unhappiness he felt his physical weakness more than ever. It was a sad weight that he had carried the last few months—that he would not even acknowledge to himself. But the biting pain, the discouraging debility so hard to fight against, the almost imperceptible tokens that disease was gaining ground, told too truly that there was little room for hope. It was a night of bitter struggles; and the morning that saw Virginia so buoyant with happiness found him a pale, changed being, with scarcely the power to smile.

"I must give her up yet a little while longer," he said, with weary sighs. "Providence may open some path for me, though, God forgive me, I hardly have faith in Providence."

A merry, bustling day it was at the cottage. Florida condescended to be very amiable, and was devising a plan to have Mrs. Owen carried down-stairs, that she might enjoy the company that had been invited. It was not long after that that old Uncle Barby came in. He had been wanting to buy the cow, but could not manage to gather together the sum Florida demanded.

"Lord bless ye, young ladies," he said, as he seated himself, at Virginia's request. "You're both young and blooming, and, praise the good Lord, you've got a long time to serve Him in. My missus is very wearisome about now, and needs the milk, being weak in the knees and unable to get round—consequently not appetizing the food such as we've had, bless God, through His providence. But I'm afeared I shall have to give it up, though the Lord sees it's for the best maybe, for which I praise His name, and let all the airth give thanks."

"Why, how much do you lack of it, Uncle Barby?" asked Florida.

"How much do I lack of it? why, I haven't got half. Fifteen is the uttermost that I can raise, and the cow's worth the forty you ask, every bit of it, for which thank the good Lord in season and out o' season."

Florida smiled, queerly.

"I've been thinking," said she, "that I sha'n't part with the cow."

"Eh! miss?" said the old man, and was about to add his customary thanks, but Florida's voice prevented.

"Suppose now I turn her over to you for safe keeping? I don't care about selling the hay I spoke for, a month ago; and if you'll see to having it got in, you may keep the cow till I claim her."

Virginia's eyes had been growing brighter and larger every moment. She had even worked herself up to the belief that Florida might make an angel, after all—only give her time.

"Why! the Lord bless ye, Miss Florida, for bein' the poor man's friend and the friend of his wife. Did you say 't I might take care o' the cow same's if 't was my own? Well, I never was more flustered, even when I fou't in Jarsey—and for which the Lord makes me very thankful accordin' to His mercies."

"You can drive her over to-morrow, if you like," said Florida.

"Yes, miss—drive her over—well—rally—bless the Lord oh! my—"

"Get her away as early as ten," said Florida, impatiently cutting short his thanks, "for we are going at eleven, and are particularly busy now, and shall be all day."

The old man took the hint and hobbled off. Virginia still stood in a maze of wonder.

"You think I am unusually benevolent, I suppose," said Florida. "Is it a new element in my character?"

"I was only wondering how you could afford it," said Virginia, simply.

"Would you like a diamond necklace, or a satin dress?" asked Florida, with a queer smile. Virginia stopped her work, and again her glances were fastened upon the face of her foster-sister. "You are afraid I am becoming demented," said Florida; "I can see it in your eyes."

"You do act strangely," responded Virginia.

"Confess, now, that you always thought me a strange being," said Florida, with a slight tinge of mischief in her tone.

Virginia was silent. Florida smiled, then hurried her work.

The widow was brought down stairs, much to her delight, for to-day she was very childish again.

"There!" exclaimed Florida, as she arranged the pillows with Virginia. "doesn't it seem comfortable, mother, to be down-stairs again?"

"It makes me happy," murmured the old lady, looking fondly toward Virginia.

"I saw just the chair you want," murmured Florida, standing off a little way. "It was green silk velvet of such a charming shade, and moved with a touch. I believe I must buy it for you."

"No, no—this is good enough," said the widow.

"It was a dear chair, too—twenty dollars Thomas gave for it before the wheels were put on."

"Dear!" said Florida, smiling a little—"the one I saw yesterday was cheap at fifty!"

"I wonder where we'd get fifty dollars for an easy-chair?" murmured the old lady. "No, no; I guess this must do for a little while longer—and it'll only be a little while. Jenny, darling, has young Mr. Parker been here to-day?"

Virginia crimsoned. She thought her mother would not remember his yesterday's visit. Florida saw the whole thing in a flash.

"I suppose he spent the day here," she said, impatiently.

"He was here some part of the day," Virginia murmured.

"Poor fellow!" said Florida, with an indescribable mingling of pathos and scorn.

Virginia felt irritated, she hardly knew why.

"I'll tell you about it to-night," Florida said. "I declare it makes my heart ache to think of it, and he so sadly sick."

"What do you mean?" asked Virginia, her fears taking the alarm. "Has any thing happened to Parker?"

"Not to-day that I know of," was the reply. "Oh!

it's something widely different from what you imagine; I'll tell you to-night. It's time to dress, Virginia."

The young girl went to her chamber, her heart chilled, her frame trembling. Florida made the most of her secrets, whenever she had any, and they were always terrible. She could not feel any interest in the duties of her toilet, and perpetrated numberless mistakes that consumed her time and made her nerves crawl. At last she had finished the task of dressing. It was very early, but Florida had thought best to be in full season, and it was nearly two hours before the company was expected. A scratch of gravel on the window startled her. She looked out. Parker, standing not far off, shading his eyes from the sun with a straw hat, held up a note, then deposited it inside a little heap of yellow leaves at the foot of an oak. Virginia hurried down, breathless with anticipation. She did not encounter Florida, and secured the note. A nameless terror crossed her heart as she read:

"DEAREST, DEAREST:—It's all up for the present. I've been *fortunate* enough to lose my city situation through the malice of the Spicers, I expect. I can't claim you yet, my darling. God knows I repent that rash deed. You might have been free—free to choose some less luckless mortal than myself. Oh! Virginia! Virginia! Yet if I should hear you say, 'I repent,' I should go mad with grief. No, no, dearest—I am certain you love me well enough to wait with patience till I am righted again; but it seems so hard. Oh! I thought to claim you to-day—what shall I do? I am almost crazy. I can't come till late, very late this afternoon. Oh! Virginia, what would Florida say? In proportion as I grow helpless, I begin to fear her. Thank God, though she could keep us asunder, she never can blot out the fact that you are my wife. Then, again, when I think that we are both minors—I scarcely twenty-one, you not seventeen—my heart trembles. Virginia, be true to me. I will yet compass a living for both of us. I will work my hands off but I'll do it. Don't fret, darling—don't take my trouble upon you, for my sake. Let me see you smile, and I shall be brave. I would not plunge you into poverty for worlds. I shall see you again before you go to the city. I dare not go just yet, till I have matured my plans, but I shall be there. My book *shall* be written, if I have to live on bread and water to accomplish it. You know it is not hard for me to fast. Oh! darling, I was angry, at first, when I thought of our yesterday's happiness, but I am glad for it now. As the hours pass it seems a delicious rest in the stormy past; fresh and green in my memory. Keep it so in yours. Good-by, darling, for a brief time. Your hoping and despairing,

"PARKER."

The color deserted Virginia's cheeks; she sunk down, faint and cold, upon the nearest seat. Florida's words were ringing in her ears, and they, with this sad letter, almost deprived her, for the moment, of life. Perhaps his enemies had defamed him—they must have assailed his character, to throw him thus from a responsible situation at one blow—and what besides had he to depend upon? The glowing, passionate face of Madge Spicer, as it appeared on that miserable day, looking in at the broken window, fiendishly, came up before her like a spirit of evil. Those hissing words, "Your character is ruined!" rung in her ears. Brought up to regard a good name beyond all price, Virginia's faith staggered as she thought of these things. Another moment and suspicion had received a deadly blow. "Whatever they say," came through her white lips, "I will still believe him. Oh! how he suffers! and I cannot be with him to tell him of my sympathy and to soothe him in his sorrow! Poor, poor Parker!"

The day that was to have been so happy was to close in gloom. Instead of being the companion of her husband, she must still, by his orders, be as a stranger. Then, to go into the great city on the

morrow, to see faces that she had never seen before—cold, uncaring faces—to bear with her the weight of Parker's woe, and to have none to tell the story of her grief to—for confidence in Florida was simply impossible.

"She will try to keep me from him," was her next bitter thought. "There I shall be more completely under her rule, and yet I cannot help myself, for I dare not leave my mother."

This tumult of the mind fitted her in nowise for the reception of company. They came, little suspecting how heavy was the heart under that quiet, unsmiling exterior.

"Seems to me Jenny's growing slim," said one and another whose vision was keener than the rest, and the young girls invited found her poor society. As the hours lagged on, Virginia was on the look-out for Parker. Florida seemed to take pleasure in commenting on his absence, and more than once brought an angry color to her cheek. The supper-table was set with exceeding good taste. As Virginia once said, it seemed as if it had been laid to have its portrait taken. Snow-white and ancient was the linen cover, and the old silver shone again. Virginia still looked for Parker, and yet she was disappointed; he did not make his appearance till it was nearly time to light the lamps.

Oh! that haggard face! Virginia felt the burning tears start to her eyes as she met it. She strove hard for composure, but her hand was hot and trembled in his; he felt it. His beauty seemed unearthly. It was nothing sentimental, nothing womanly, for the bold contour and the resolute expression were there; but suffering had stamped it with a delicacy and pureness that seemed some way unreal. At times the fitful red dashed his cheeks, setting his eyes in a blaze—at times his face was colorless as the pale alabaster, and almost as transparent.

He found a chance for a few moments' chat with Virginia.

"Oh! Parker!" was all she could say.

"Well, darling, don't think of it. Since I am here with you, the old happiness comes back. I feel as if it would all be made right some time. Let us hope and wait. Oh! Virginia, you are dressed exactly as you were the night we were married."

She smiled through her tears at the pleasure it seemed to give him.

"Tell me truly, love—are you sorry?"

"Oh! Parker, how can you ask?" she cried in a broken voice.

"And if I should see it was my duty to leave you, perhaps long years—for it may be, darling, I can get nothing to do here, and I think I am sure of a situation in the place of my birth—still you would not regret?"

"Don't leave me, Parker,"—the lips were grieved as those of a babe.

"I would not, God knows I would not, but—Virginia, I am ill."

She looked up with new alarm.

"There is something the matter with me, love; I can no longer conceal it from myself. You see this burning color, which seems, sometimes, fire, eating into the bone—you do not see my marks of suffering—when the pain forces great drops to my forehead. I must prepare you for the worst, and I am trying to prepare myself."

"The worst!" gasped Virginia.

"The worst, darling. Perhaps, with renewed hopes, and less excitement, I might get over these unfavorable symptoms; but, if I do not, for your sake, as well as my own, I shall try a voyage somewhere, in search of health. I only say, perhaps, darling. It may be that I am giving heed to my fear—since this trouble has come; let us hope it is so—and let us be happy together now. If you don't take care, they will all see that you have been weeping."

"Let them," said Virginia, passionately; "they may say and think what they please. Parker, I am your wife; I will not be parted from you. Let us go somewhere together: I will work and help you."

"My poor little darling—you do not know what you say. It would break your mother's heart, and—"

"Oh! I had forgotten mother," cried Virginia; "but, Parker, I can not live in this miserable way. You have given me a new cause for alarm. Oh! Parker, of long, dark nights, I shall keep awake and think you are dying. You need nursing; you need care: Come and stay with us—Florida will yield when I tell her. I think she loves me some, come—shall we tell them all before they go? Some way will be provided."

"I can not, Virginia, I can not," he said, huskily. "To live dependent in any way on her bounty, or yours or any other, would soon kill me. I am proud, Virginia, I can not help it—but I would rather die, than let them know what a helpless man you have married. No, my love—for a time it will be better for us to live as we have lived—only love me still, Virginia, love me still with all your heart and soul—don't mistrust me—don't listen to what others may say about me, and I shall be happy. When I think of you, and say to myself, 'There is one who cares for me, who is even now, perhaps, thinking of me'—oh! it restores me so much. That is all I want, darling. Don't think of the symptoms I spoke of—I was in low spirits then—now I am happy again. But, they will begin to wonder about us. Come, come; who is strongest now? Let me see you smile."

She tried to smile, poor child! but it was a sad smile enough—so sad that it made his heart ache.

By ten, the little cottage was still again. The invalid had been wheeled only into another room, that she might be ready for the morrow's journey, and Florida, never quiet when she was awake, moved here and there, putting the final touches to her arrangements.

"I thought your friend seemed more under the weather than usual," she said, casting uneasy glances toward Virginia.

"You mean Parker," murmured her sister, trying to be calm, and anxious though dreading to hear the news. "I believe he is not quite as well as usual."

"I was afraid, once," said Florida, assuming a careless manner, "that your intimacy was really bordering upon the sentimental. I was afraid he'd want to marry you, Virginia."

"And what if he had?" queried Virginia, not daring to lift up her eyes.

"I am afraid you would sorely have repented of it. Not only is he incompetent to gain a livelihood in consequence of ill health, but—" She turned—Virginia's eyes were fastened upon her, wild with the terror in them.

"For pity's sake, child—you look at me as if I were a ghost, or a spirit of evil."

"What were you going to tell me?"

"Suppose your mother had never married your father," asked Florida, slowly, "with what feelings would you have regarded yourself, to-day?"

Virginia could not answer; her very blood seemed curdling in her veins, and the weird, mysterious manner of her half-sister—the face that looked like a judgment in the dim light—sent a thrill so sharp through all her frame that she could with difficulty suppress a cry of terror. She remembered with the rapidity of lightning, a poor girl who had once lived in the village with her mother, and whose doom was this unhappy one. Gentle as she had always been, yet the strong Puritan element infused in her nature, by the strictest religious culture, teaching her, with an uncharitableness found nowhere in the lessons of the Master, to hold no fellowship with those who went astray from virtue, led her to look with horror upon this poor, innocent child of shame. She remembered, now, the pale, unhappy face—the shrinking ways of the unfortunate—her downcast look, her miserable attire. She thought of the intense pity, mingled with loathing, which she herself had been taught to feel.

"Oh! Florida—what an awful question!" she

cried, bursting into tears. "Why do you think of such things?"

"I wished to tell you about Parker." Virginia grew chill again—she had not thought of him in connection with such a terrible doom. Nor, strange to say, did she now, although the directness of her sister's speech might have impressed one less interested.

"I have looked upon your intimacy with him as mere girl and boy affection, that would in time burn itself out," said Florida, now seating herself, "and I did not wish to lower *him* in your estimation by telling you the facts I have learned; but I believe the time has come when it is inevitable. It is known now, Virginia, that Parker bears his mother's name, having no father in the eye of law. His mother was a dancing girl in a low theater, somewhere in the South, of no reputation whatever. I pity the poor fellow, but—Virginia!"

Again she cried, some terror in her voice—"Virginia!"

The young girl neither answered, or moved. Her very eyes seemed set in stone. Florida was frightened. She sprung to her feet—placed both hands on her shoulders, and shook her violently. The motion restored consciousness to some degree. Virginia twined her arms wildly about Florida, sobbing as she cried, "Are you sure?—are you *very* sure?—oh! Florida, you have broken my heart."

There was a long silence, for Virginia had fainted in her sister's arms.

Florida lifted the insensible form and carried it to the nearest couch. There depositing her, she hurried for water. There was a strange vindictiveness in her manner, that at such a time seemed almost demonic.

"Let her suffer," she cried, between locked lips; "I hate her for loving, for being loved by him. I would have given my very soul for a smile, even if crime had been added to shame; but she is weak, and will renounce him. Then I am rich—I have power. Virginia!" she cried again, as the strained eyes slowly opened—"foolish girl! I had better held my tongue."

"Oh! Florida! what *did* you tell me?" cried Virginia, passionately, despairingly. "It was about Parker—I remember now—I am sick, deadly sick—but not for that—no, no; I never, never, *never* will believe that. Oh! he has such bitter enemies!"

"It is true, Virginia; still, if I had known how the matter would affect you, I should have held my tongue. Now you see why I have always been so cool toward the schoolmaster. You could not understand it; for at first the matter was only hinted at; then whispered about, and now it is publicly known all over the town."

"I don't believe it, Florida; I tell you it is a lie!" Virginia almost shrieked, flinging herself from the couch. "You should hear him speak of his mother. He called her pure and holy—do you suppose if *that* was true, he would mention her name? No; he would never hold up his head again, with all his pride; it would kill him. I won't believe it, Florida; I won't believe it."

"Your belief or unbelief will not alter the facts, Virginia."

"Florida, do you hate him?" cried Virginia, with such vehemence that her sister started and changed color. "Yes, you do, I believe you hate him—I believe you hate me. Oh, I wish we both were buried, buried."

"Virginia"—Florida had grown deathly pale—"even in this thing have I not endeavored to do a sister's duty?"—her voice was mournful—her manner mingled sorrow and grief. "Yes, for I promised my father I would guide you, protect you from evil; and, through the consciousness of a responsibility so great, may have made my manner less tender; yet I feel that I have little to reproach myself with. I did not deserve such language from you."

"Oh! Florida, forgive me—oh! Florida, forget what I said. I am ungrateful—I have been ungrateful. If you had but told me before—but now—so

late—Florida—I am—I love him," she sobbed, brokenly.

"Well—and if you are prepared to live in perpetual ignominy, to bear his name coupled with another that has been lightly spoken upon foulest lips—if you are prepared to give life to innocent childhood that shall blush for its parentage—if, after counting the cost, you will willingly bear all the trials of such a fate, marry him. The dishonor will be felt only for a lifetime," she added, with soft but cruel irony.

"Oh! what a night!" cried Virginia, despairingly. She was as yet a child, still under the influence of the stern principles that held such a sin to be worse than murder. Ridicule and scorn were terrible weapons to her, for she was sensitive, and had never felt the breath of either, though all her trials were magnified tenfold. She thought of Parker's agitation when he spoke of his mother—of the father *whom he did not know*, and the recollection shook her whole being as with a mortal agony. Yesterday!—she could not bear to think of it. It seemed ages and ages ago—and let what disgrace might come, she was irrevocably his wife; so, for a time, she was immersed in the cold waters of despair. Reason and hope were prostrate, but they would rise soon; even love for a brief moment slept, but its waking was sure. From henceforth the child had gone, the woman had taken her place. She crept, haggard and suffering, to her couch, wishing in vain that she might die. Courage had yet not come to her; the world seemed all dark, and fate cruel. It was her first heavy sorrow.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE CITY—A GREAT SURPRISE.

"This party is given in your honor, of course."

The gentleman whom Florida had surprised with Mr. Burney was the speaker. A slighter, more elegant man leaned against the mantle, his arms folded, his dark eyes kindled—a smile on his lips as he coolly surveyed the glittering vista beyond. Flowers and diamonds, floating drapery, tissues and feathers, and beauty made gorgeous by the gas-light, met the view everywhere. White-armed dames, as careless of their charms as their daughters, floated by, all having smiles and nods for Horace Dudley, the eligible bachelor of thirty-two.

A shrewd smile was the answer. A moment after, Horace Dudley spoke. "They are very kind. I wonder how they would manage if I brought home a wife."

"Oh! you rich young fellows must expect to be ogled and sighed for. I am past all that nonsense. Society has about made up its mind that I'm not a marrying man, and, perhaps," he added, with a good-natured grimace, "they are—wrong."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Dudley.

"I'll tell you what," spoke the elder, whose name was Le Roy, "if ever I should think of settling down in good earnest, I saw the woman yesterday that I should like to make my wife."

"Ah!"

"Yes—a magnificent creature; none of your *petite* beauties with little languishing ways and zephyr-like sighs, but a nobly-planned woman—large, full of life, steady-eyed, self-poised; oh! I admired that woman greatly, though, at first glance, I saw that she was far from fashionable or rich."

"Quite a description," said Horace Dudley, who felt but little interest, having listened often to harangues of similar import.

"I'm going to find her out, too. She was in at Burney's this morning."

"Ah! at Burney's!" The listlessness had gone—Horace Dudley waked up and concentrated his attention upon the matter in hand—"a full formed, dark-eyed woman."

"Superbly proportioned," responded Mr. Le Roy, with new enthusiasm, "and an eye—I tell you, Dudley, it goes hard with whoever that eye lights on. I'm ashamed of myself but, absolutely, I believe I'm taken in and done for—to use a most inelegant but expressive phrase."

"I know whom you mean, perfectly well; she called upon me to-day;" and the lips parted in an amused smile.

"She did! called upon *you*? Who is she, pray—what is her name?"

"Miss Florida Owen."

Le Roy drew a long breath.

"Florida! the very name of all names. Tropical, luxurious—full of summer verdure and beauty. But come, I'm somewhat interested to ascertain how you came to know this woman. Who is she?"

"I know nothing more of her than that she has hired my house as it stands, for the winter—the whole establishment through—stables, horses and all. Now what do you think of her?"

Le Roy stood aghast.

"The woman is rich, then."

"Yes; I understand from Burney, suddenly enriched. I have seen her before, though—her countenance is very familiar. Do you remember what I told you the other day?"

"What! the nonsense about a vase, and all that?"

"You are the last man to laugh at the 'nonsense,'" said Horace, significantly.

"Well, well; perhaps I am. But, now—how?"

"This Miss Florida Owen has a younger sister. It is barely possible that I may be mistaken, but I think it was with her I first saw that face, that has made all others, since, seem tame by contrast. At any rate, they will be here day after to-morrow. On that afternoon I have made my arrangements to sail; but I declare to you, if I had not for so long a time announced my intention of going, I should be tempted to put it off, provided things are as they seem to promise."

"Perhaps the other sister is married or engaged."

"She distinctly said *Miss Virginia Owen*," was the reply; "they may both of them be engaged for all we can tell."

"I shall contrive to drop in on Thursday," said Le Roy.

"Very well; I will introduce you. After that, you will perhaps have an opportunity to become better acquainted."

"I tell you what, Dudley, if you find this young lady is your ideal, I'll say a good word for you—that is, if I prosper in my wooing; if I don't, the dickens take the whole of them. But, man, what are you thinking about? You, the catch of the season, wasting your superb talents in idleness. Rouse up; the ladies are dying to tread the light fantastic toe with you, and really they must feel slighted."

At that moment a tall, fleshy woman, with cheeks so vividly crimson that they suggested a comparison with those purple-red dahlias one sees in fine gardens, moved by with a stately tread. On her arm hung the belle of the season, her niece, the daughter of some general or other, whom she had dragged from a fashionable watering-place to make a sensation here, and, maybe, with faint hopes that she might insnare that rich and handsome bachelor, Horace Dudley. The management was so admirable, that Horace and the fat woman were instantly engaged in conversation; an introduction took place, and Mr. Dudley asked for "the honor"—offering his hand significantly, smiling down the room where sets were already forming. The general's niece was really a very attractive girl—talked well, though with a certain air of affectation. She professed to be familiar with the name. "There is a family in my native town," she said, "English born, who spell their name with a 'leigh,'" and she looked at him questioningly.

"Mine cannot boast of so aristocratic a termination," he said, smiling a little. "I am of the old New Hampshire Dudleys, a race of farmers from the beginning, as far as I know."

The belle looked a little shocked, but seemed to reconcile herself, with a high-bred inquisitorial glance at her partner, for he was unquestionably the most elegant man in the room. She wished, perhaps, that she might get him perhaps she thought she could. She was disappointed when he

led her to a seat but could not be charmed into an absorbing conversation; she was less pleased when he left her for another and *not* a prettier partner—a young lady who appeared to have no fear of *Madame Grundy*, or of society, fashionable or otherwise, before her eyes, but whose manners amused men and shocked maidens.

"Indeed, Mr. Dudley, it's too bad of you to take this tour," she said, as they paused for a moment; "all the girls feel dreadfully about it, but I don't suppose any one would say so for the world, beside myself."

"I am much flattered, Miss Fanny," he replied.

"Oh! you needn't be in the least. After all, most of us only care enough for the beaux to dance and flirt with them, you know. I suppose you can say ditto. You, however, would fairly tire the earnest ones out. We get weary of trying, you see."

"Then you confess—"

"Of course I do," retorted Miss Fanny, before he could finish his sentence; "of course, we *all* try; and the successful fellow is the best. Why, what do you think we take so much pains to *rig up*, for, and to show off in this style, if it is not for some specific object? I thought all you men knew it," she added, naively.

"Oh! no; we are to be supposed entirely ignorant, and look upon you young ladies as so many angels, innocent of all intention to captivate or subdue."

"Angels"—she gave a light laugh; "you wouldn't think us angels if you saw us at home. Minnie—that's my sister—and I had an awful quarrel over our ribbons this very night. She wanted blue and so did I, and neither of us would wear it if the other did."

"Well, how did you manage?" queried Horace, much amused.

"Oh! I bought her off with a ring she has longed for this great while. You see I triumph in blue; but I'll make a bargain before many days that will bring back that ring, you'd better believe," she teased her head sagaciously. "But how long are you going to stay, Mr. Dudley? I heard it was a year. What will Miss Loyd and Miss Carey do?—there! I am betraying secrets."

The young man opened his eyes and bit his lip. She saw his movement, and deepened the impression by saying: "Oh! I don't know as they care about you. Come now, don't look so conscious; there, see, you are forgetting the figure."

"I shall be heartily glad when the figure is over," said Horace Dudley to himself.

"How dreadfully dull it will look about here when your house is closed, Mr. Dudley," persisted his pretty but rude partner.

"It will not be closed, Miss Fanny. You will have neighbors, for I have let it."

"Indeed!" echoed the young lady, as, lifting both hands, she adjusted a stray ringlet with more persistency than grace.

"Yes, indeed."

"Oh! Mr. Dudley, I wish you'd tell me all about it."

"With pleasure, Miss Fanny. The house is taken for a lady slightly aged, and almost bedridden."

"Horrible! and will she have no one with her? no daughters?"

"Two, Miss Fanny."

"Oh! I wonder if I shall like them. Are they agreeable?"

"All ladies are agreeable to me, Miss Fanny."

"They wouldn't be if you knew them as well as I do," retorted Miss Fanny, in such a blunt, matter-of-fact way, that Mr. Dudley lost his self possession, and laughed outright.

"I trust you will find these people exceptions," he said, recovering himself.

All over the room there was a general mourning at the prospect of a loss so detrimental to "our set." Mr. Dudley was, I might remark, a bright and shining light in more respects than one. In fact, he was a desirable friend, a man to be loved (by some hopelessly) for his simple, manly virtues, and it had long

been the ambition of the reigning beauties to secure him for a husband. Vain all their attempts; he was not to be caught with chaff, nor with wheat either. His heart was faithful to that one memory, and until he could find its counterpart or the reality, it was in his own keeping.

The ball over, Horace Dudley contrived to pass the succeeding day in the agreeable business of packing, then waited for the morning in a singular state of nervousness. While, on the eventful Friday, he deliberately adjusted his cravat, and, bent upon looking his best, arranged and rearranged his hair, the inmates of the little cottage were in no less a state of excitement. Florida was giving directions here, there and everywhere; Virginia was devoting herself exclusively to her mother, who was childishly happy at the prospect of a change. Virginia did not smile, and her face seemed as rigid as marble. The color—that luminous, golden tint, that, like some wonderful liquid, usually suffused her features and glowed in her brown hair—was all gone, and she seemed as one unconscious of life. It was pitiful to see the weary droop of her eyes—its patient, though sorrowful uplifting, and the mouth, that should have been curved only to sunny smiles, grieving now and then with the helpless passiveness of a babe who sees strange shadows about it, and hears not the step of its mother. In fact she took no heed of what was going on. It did not astonish her that the cottage furniture remained unpacked or that a handsome city carriage stood at the door to convey them away. She arranged herself in the rich traveling-dress, and the new, neat bonnet Florida had brought from town, mechanically, without giving one thought to their beauty. She had a confused idea that her half-sister had sacrificed every thing to appearances so far, but that they were going to some out-of-the-way place, where all the sweet comforts of their country-life would be denied them, and where, in the dark days of fog and gloom, Florida would toil with her needle, while she would do the work of the household. And all this was so different from her plans hitherto. In them she saw the dark rooms made cheerful with love; a glowing fire and a table drawn up before it; Parker at her side writing out his beautiful story; Florida, reconciled and busy, listening and taking part in the genial hearth-side talk. Now she was separated from the man she loved; doubts and fears had been cast in her way; the terrible consciousness of his disgrace made her wretched, though her affection never wavered. At last they were ready.

"I shall leave the house as it is, for the present," Florida said, as, after her mother was placed in the carriage, she applied the key to the lock.

"But if the things do not come to-day, how can we possibly manage?" asked Virginia.

"You will see," was Florida's reply, and Virginia neither cared nor asked for more, but, throwing down her veil, gave herself up to the gloomiest reflections.

To the toll-gate, was a two miles' drive. The coachman had instructions to proceed at his ease, on account of Mrs. Owen, and he followed them literally. They reached the toll-bridge and the driver stopped. A vessel was going through the draw at some little distance. Virginia had been sitting listlessly holding her mother's hand. Suddenly her beautiful bloom came back—her eyes gave bright, surprised glances. There stood Parker, not a yard distant, resting against the door of the toll-house, and at that moment speaking with the keeper. Virginia forgot all, everything but that he was there, and, leaning out of the carriage, to the discomfiture of Florida, she called him.

Let them say what they would; let him be what he would—in her eyes, then, he was noble and beautiful. She threw back the accusations of Florida from her own soul. He, on his part, saw nothing but her—saw not Florida's reserved but nervous manner, and barely spoke to the invalid, whose eyes closed again with the old weariness they had borne so long. He must have passed an uneasy night, for his face, in

glow and sparkle, was almost supernaturally beautiful, and it was ever so when disease had kept him wakeful or restless.

"I stole a march on you," he said; "for, seeing a carriage driving through the village, I thought it might be for you and I walked on. So you are really gone."

Virginia could not speak for emotion.

"Virginia, I am afraid the air from that side is too much for mother," said Florida, in a cold voice. "She is asleep now."

"I will go on the other side," said Parker, smiling toward Virginia, "and you can put the window up. I hope you have no objection, Miss Owen," he added, turning to Florida, who moved uneasily, but said, "Oh! no," in as careless a voice as she could assume, though her heart fairly ached with envy and rage.

"I am glad we met him," said Virginia, as the carriage started again, and both voice and manner implied that whatever unpleasant impression she might have had was now obliterated.

The scornful curl of her sister's lip was her only answer; but Virginia, too happy now to heed opposition of any kind, smiled as she sunk back in her seat, her hope and her love undiminished.

Proceeding now without delay, they soon reached the city, where the uneven motion of the carriage awoke the invalid, who gazed around her in bewilderment that soon merged into a childish delight.

"What are you stopping here for, Florida?" Virginia asked, on seeing her sister apparently ready to get out.

"Because this is our home," said Florida, calmly.

"This! this elegant house! I can't understand it, Florida, it must be a mistake."

"We shall find it out, soon enough, if it is," said Florida—and, like one in a dream, Virginia descended the steps of the carriage and was motioned up those of the house by a servant who stood near. Astonishment had given her a fine bloom, and through the little gauzy veil that fell from her bonnet, her face was most charming. Entering the vestibule, and striving for command to sustain this altogether novel position, she encountered the respectful gaze of Horace Dudley. It was at once admiring and reverential; for he saw before him, more fully developed into womanly, symmetrical beauty, the very being of whom he had thought and even dreamed so often, since that chance meeting years ago.

It flashed over Virginia's mind on the moment that Florida had engaged to fill some position in this gentleman's household, and she was quite confounded at the humble courtesy of a middle-aged woman who asked if she should show "Miss" to her room. Virginia assented, still dumb with wonder, and, following the woman, landed in the hall above, from which opened a suite of rooms, splendid enough in her sight for a princess. Into one of these, connected with another large and elegant apartment, she was ushered. The beds were hung with lace, underneath which shone soft colors, and richer shades in masses of flowers closely grouped on a white ground, adorned the carpet. A mirror, resting in a frame-work of massive gold, reached to the ceiling.

They were assisting her mother up-stairs. The old lady was led into the room next to Virginia. She was voluble in her expressions of delight, as Virginia went toward her.

"There, this is the easy-chair I spoke of," said Florida, pointing to it. It was a beautiful affair, of deep green velvet, highly ornamented, and so constructed that it could be changed into a couch at will.

"Did—you buy it?" asked Virginia, hardly crediting her senses.

"To be sure I bought it," replied Florida. "You may go now," she said to the waiting woman with all the nonchalance of the thoughtless mistress; "I will ring when I want you—and see that lunch is made ready."

All this time, Virginia, wonder-eyed, looked on. Florida laughed.

"Well, well—what a beautiful place," murmured Mrs. Owen, her glances roving delightedly. "How long are we going to stay here, Florry? Is it a hotel, dear?"

"No, mother, it is our home, your home for some time to come yet," said Florida.

"But I don't understand, Florida," said Virginia, a little impatiently, "what's to pay for all this?"

"Money," replied Florida, sententiously.

"Of course; but we have no money."

"That is, you think so," replied Florida. "Virginia—we are rich."

"Rich!" murmured the young girl.

"Yes, at last, rich," was the reply.

"We are rich?" repeated Virginia.

"My father's brother died recently in England and left his whole fortune to us," said Florida.

"Oh! then it belongs to you, of course," responded Virginia, drawing a long breath.

"It belongs to your mother, Virginia; but as she is incapacitated by illness, the management of the property will, of course, as his own daughter, fall upon me. But you, though you have no legal right, shall share in our good fortune; I will do everything for you, Virginia, that the truest sister should."

"I thank you," was all Virginia could say. Her heart swelled at the thought of Parker's loneliness and poverty, rendered doubly appalling in her sight, now that luxuries and wealth surrounded her. Her sister watched her anxiously, but saw no brightening of the eye, no signs of pleasure, and she, too truly, guessed why.

Poor Parker! The care was on her mind all day. She tried to divert herself by assiduous attentions to her mother, who had to be repeatedly told of the change in her fortune. But the intruding thought would return. What would come of it all? Could she, much longer, drag this consciousness about, and deceive those who were so near and ought to be so dear to her? There was a weight on her heart that made all her joys bitter. If it could only have been that she had a right to any of this money, she would have taken it, no matter how small the share, and gone with her husband even to the ends of the earth; for she felt, now, since that last interview, how dear he was to her. To be sure, the hot blood shot up into her cheeks as she remembered the story that Florida had told. It must be true. Florida was very cautious and careful—she would never have spoken of it, unless it had been well substantiated. Once again, as she was going downstairs, she encountered Horace Dudley. She could not but be struck with something in his appearance that interested her, and when her sister, who was coming just then into the hall, introduced her, she wondered at the tremulous pressure of his hand.

"Who is he?" she asked, a moment after, when they were alone together.

"The owner of this house," Florida replied; "he is just starting for Europe; but I think, if he has a chance to see you a few times more, by the way he looks at you, he will feel like giving up his tour and staying at home."

Virginia blushed crimson. Perhaps his glances toward her had a somewhat magnetic effect; for the same, or rather, an impression, that she would not for the world have put into words, and which, without Florida's speech, might not even have been acknowledged to herself—had crossed her mind. In her very soul, however, she was glad that he was going to Europe.

In the afternoon, the lawyer called, accompanied by Mr. Le Roy, to whose face Virginia was instantaneously attracted—why, she could not tell. Even his voice charmed her, but it was with no warmer feeling than a childlike friendship. There was something in his look and manner familiar to her—his clear, dark eye, his musical voice, his quite unpretending speech, all had for her a nameless attraction.

"Oh! how like that man!" she exclaimed, when the two were left alone again.

"He is very handsome, certainly," said Florida, quietly.

"It is not that—what is it? He is charming!" reiterated Virginia.

"And a millionaire in the bargain," said Florida, looking at her with a meaning smile.

"Is he so very rich? Oh, dear! I wish I had some of his money—I know what I would do with it."

"Perhaps you might have it all," said Florida, warily.

"Goodness! such a thought never entered my mind," was Virginia's response. "I hope you don't think he was smitten with me, too," she said, laughing.

"Oh! no; if I am not mistaken, it is all the other way," said Florida, frankly. "I think he rather admires me, but, as I have no fancy for the gentleman, and as you are a great deal prettier than I am, there's no knowing how matters may turn. You may choose your own cage, now, Virginia; we are no longer poor nobodies; we shall soon have the influence and the society that wealth commands. How you shrink, you foolish little goosel! You will get accustomed to all that sort of thing, in time, and wonder how you ever could live without it."

"Oh! but I wouldn't marry the richest man in the world, now," said Virginia, chokingly.

Florida looked at her, in her own keen, penetrating way—and only saying, "We shall see," turned to leave the room.

"Florida!" cried Virginia, entreatingly.

Her half-sister looked back in some surprise.

"I wanted to tell you—I wanted to say—" trembling, flushed, her eyes dilated, her lips quivering, she attempted in vain to finish the sentence.

"Well," said Florida, imperatively, "speak quickly, then—I am hurried."

Virginia's hands fell powerless—the color faded from her cheeks, the light from her eyes.

"It's—no—matter," she almost gasped, and Florida, seeing that she said nothing more, walked leisurely out of the room.

"I do believe she knows all," sobbed the girl, the tears now raining down her cheeks. "Oh! I am so very wretched! How long will this terror and this misery last. I must tell, or it will drive me mad. If she does know it, she is cruel—if not, then she will be—I have no mercy to expect from her, for she never loved."

Blind with tears, she hurried from the room and gained her own chamber. A soft, weak, tremulous voice struck upon her ear, quivering unevenly, yet sweetly, through the mazes of some old church-tune. Half frightened, she crept to the door. It was her mother, crooning to herself—a sound she had not heard for years. There she sat, her hands folded peacefully over her lap, her head resting against the back of the chair, her eyes closed, but a saintly light enveloping the face that was aged prematurely.

It made her heart light, notwithstanding, to see her mother so happy. She crept in, and sunk on her knees beside her.

"Mother, it sounds good to hear you sing," she said, softly.

"Oh! does it? But that isn't singing, you know, Jenny dear. Did I ever tell you how I used to lead in the old Greenwich choir?"

Ay! a hundred times had those old memories been poured into the willing ear of Virginia.

"I think you may have, mother," she replied, with an innocent caution; "but I'd like to hear you again."

"Ah! those days are long past," murmured the invalid. "They used to say I had a splendid voice; and once a great singer wanted to educate me. He said I might make my fortune; but father, being a very strict churchman, never was willing, though I wanted to go, dreadfully. Well, they had a fine choir in old Greenwich. The singers never used to quarrel, as they say singers do nowadays. Let me see: there was Mary Alder, she was second treble; Gerusha Shepherd, she was counter—and such a

voice! why, for clear tones, like a bird's, she astonished everybody. I sung first treble; and I *could* sing then, Jenny. At my right stood first base; that was old deacon Rider—such a severely good man that everybody was afraid of him! Then came Thomas. Dear! dear—little I thought, when I first saw him—and how nice he did look, in that blue suit with bright brass buttons!—little I thought that he would be my own dear husband. You don't know how handsome he was, Virginia. You look like him, child—I mean when he was young; for hard work made Thomas old before his time. Well, what good times we used to have in singing-school! You know we met in the school-house, and the seats were very low and small. I expect 'twas a funny sight, child, to see us all sitting there, old and young; for the old folks went to keep us in order. I used to boil up chestnuts and eat them on the sly, with somebody to help. Oh! dear—I can seem to see old deacon Possom's snow-white head. We used to call him granny Possom; he had a face that you might almost light a candle at, and—and—well—where was I, child?" and her glances traveled, wearily, painfully around.

"But what were you singing, just now, mother?"

"Why, don't you know Corinth, child? You ought to; you've been sung to sleep hundreds of times by Corinth. I *do* hope they sing in heaven, for I should like to hear that old tune sung once as it ought to be. It came the nearest to it in old Greenwich meeting-house."

Virginia had hidden her face in her hands. Her mother took no heed, but mused in silence for a time.

"I'm sure I never thought to live in such a fine house as this. Florida is wonderful smart, Jenny, and I'm certain she tries to be kind to me; but for all that, there's a want of something—I wonder what it is?"

"It's love, mother, real love and tenderness. Florida *knows* everything—or it would not take her long to, if she wished; but—" a heavy sigh told more than words.

"Jenny, aren't you happy, dear? You don't look yourself, someway, of late. I've noticed it now and then, but it's gone from my memory again. My memory's dreadful poor—I wonder why? I ain't so very old."

Again the thought was gone. Virginia longed to tell her mother all, but she feared the effects of such news upon her in her present debilitated state. Her mother placed her hand upon her head, patting it fondly.

"You are so like my Thomas," she murmured—"so like my Thomas. He'd hold all his grief in from me."

What did her mother mean? Virginia looked questioningly in her face, but again, apparently, she had forgotten and her eyes were closing in sleep. So Virginia stole away to her room, there to think, to sorrow, and to plan—I should not say the latter, for she had but little encouragement to plan upon.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PARTY—AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

At last Florida's ambition was satisfied. She had sent out cards of invitation to the choice and select few, and none of them had returned regrets. Her first party was therefore to be a success. Her dress for that occasion made her regal—crimson and black, with a very few and well-arranged ornaments. Her loveliness in such an attire was almost startling, and left an impression on the beholder that did not soon wear off. Everybody of note had heard of Florida, the handsomest woman in the city, and, of course all the world was on the *qui vive* to see her in the capacity of hostess. Many expected to be amused with a *bona fide* specimen of rusticity suddenly elevated, while others expected simply to be amused with country-talk and the aping of stylish manners.

Never did well-bred guests betray astonishment more unexpectedly than they, Florida's innate ele-

gance surprised them into reverence—the costly materials of her dress, and her exquisite finish in every design, betrayed them into unequivocal compliments. Virginia did not come down till quite late, having found it impossible to leave her mother. She was arrayed, like the pure water-lily, in the snowiest white crape, and moved among the glittering crowd, gathering smiles and pretty sayings as she went.

Meanwhile, Florida was the observed of all observers, the closely-followed by more than one man of note and wealth. The most favored of the gentlemen, however, was undoubtedly Le Roy, who was thoroughly in love, and would scarcely have given a straw for existence if assured that she was indifferent toward him. But for some reasons, that Florida knew best, she was unusually attentive.

She smiled on him, and he felt, diffident though a sincere affection might make him appear, that he was not unattractive to her. He had told himself that to-night he would propose; but when near her, something in her manner forbade him to approach the subject.

Virginia had lost her interest in the scene. Her heart felt a longing for rest, that had, of late, become almost painful.

Suddenly she was aware of an unusual stir. A thrill ran through her frame, for which she could not account, till, raising her eyes, she found herself in the presence of Parker.

Virginia was too little schooled in the ways of the fashionable world to keep her delight and her surprise to herself.

"Oh, Parker!" she said, her eyes overbrimming with delight, "you here?"

"I would not have come, for the world, in an assembly like this," he answered, in a low voice, casting a glance along his threadbare, but well-kept clothes, "but your servant, thinking I was one of the late guests, I suppose, ushered me right in."

"You look as well as any of them," whispered Virginia. "Oh! I am so glad to see you, but—" At that moment she caught Florida's eye. It was fastened with a curious expression upon Parker. Was it hate?—a thrill of new terror ran through Virginia's veins—was it love? Something unusual was revealed to her in that glance.

As I said, Florida had stood for a moment, her eyes transfixed as the youth met her gaze. For a moment her cool, habitual indifference was gone, and, had an interested person been looking on, traces of a struggle, almost deadly, might have been seen in that beautiful face.

Another had seemed as evidently agitated when Parker entered—it was Le Roy. Ever on the watch, he might have followed Florida's glance; and if he did, he saw enough to make his heart beat with more violence than it ever had before.

Certain it was that three of that brilliant company were startled if not pleased with the new arrival. Le Roy watched Florida keenly—as keenly watched Parker. Indeed, he chose a position from where he had the latter in full view, and, folding his arms, his lips set tightly, he divided his glances uneasily between Florida and the young man. After some moments of anxious gazing, he managed to gain the side of Florida.

"I see we have a new-comer here," he said.

"Yes—one of Virginia's old acquaintances—a schoolmaster, and quite an amiable young man."

"Yes; I should judge him, to be one of Virginia's friends," said Le Roy, with a meaning smile.

He marked the color come high and quick in the already flushed cheeks before him, and thought it was caused by mortification, for he saw how painfully the shabbiness of the young man's dress contrasted with the rich garments near. It might have been that thought that made him offer his arm to Florida, and conduct her to another part of the room.

Meanwhile, the fashionables had dropped off from the small area occupied by Virginia and Park-

er, though many a glance was cast toward the young man, of haughty curiosity mingled with admiration.

"How can you bear all this glitter, Virginia?" asked Parker, after a moment of silence.

"I don't like it, Parker; it confuses and annoys me. Among all the faces, I don't see one that my heart goes out toward, and the whole is something so little in accordance with my taste that I often long to get back to our dear old cottage. Oh, Parker! I was not made for such living as this."

"I heard it only a few days back. They are going in to supper," he said, pausing a moment. "Let us remain here in some of the rooms—or will they miss you?"

"Let us remain, Parker," said Virginia eagerly. "They'll not miss me."

"I was going to say," began Parker, standing back as the throngs filed by, "that I only heard this news a few days ago—and it electrified me. 'Virginia rich?' I thought—"

"I have nothing to do with it," spoke Virginia, hastily. "I am as dependent as ever, living upon my mother's bounty."

"Be that as it may," said Parker, "the information made me unaccountably sad. You seemed, from that moment, lost to me, darling."

At that he made the gesture that Virginia had learned to know, and that betokened severe physical pain. Virginia's heart sunk.

"What shall I get for you, Parker?"

"Nothing—it is over; but it is strange—the least mental excitement is followed by that terrible throb, as if the pulse of my heart was wounded."

"I did not notice at first—but I think you are in trouble, Parker."

"Trouble! I was born for it," he muttered. "I think, darling, that I am expiating, somewhere about the fourth or fifth generation, for the sins of my fathers. I haven't any business yet. What shall I do?"

"Don't despair, Parker."

"I have despaired already!" The voice was so heart-broken that Virginia shuddered.

"You may think me weak-minded to a degree when you see how my ill-fortune affects me; but, oh! it is utterly useless for me to try to keep up. Virginia, I must go, before your proud sister returns. She is ashamed of me. I am the unsightly blot upon this fair company."

He spoke with such bitterness, in tones so utterly hopeless, that for a moment paralyzed Virginia.

"Parker," she said, when her emotion would allow her, "you will spoil all the happiness this meeting has given me. There is surely room for you in the ranks of the world's workers, and remember that it is *always* the darkest just before day."

"An eternal night has settled upon me," he said.

"You cannot understand—oh! my God!" and he turned from her, almost writhing with his soul's anguish; "you cannot understand. I am shut out from health, from occupation—and from you."

"Parker"—she laid her hand on his feverish palm—"Parker, take me with you. I will desert all for you!"

"Poverty forbids," he cried, almost fiercely.

"What! I take you from such a home as this? I darken your young life with hardships, and curse it with regrets and reproaches? Never! I'll die first."

"You are cruel," she said, half-sobbing. "You do not know me. You treat me like a child."

"I am causing you to suffer," he said, a tender regret in his voice. "Virginia, you must make allowances; I am hardly myself now. Perhaps, *perhaps*, better times *may* come,"—even as he spoke he shook his head doubtfully. "They stay long at supper," he added, attempting a smile.

"Parker, don't give up yet; wait—"

"I have waited, Virginia."

"A little longer, Parker; you are young, so am I; some good fortune will come. Let me prophesy—there's a good time coming."

"Yes; but I am going."

This impressive sentence gave a chill to the heart of the young girl, that seemed as if a wave from the cold waters of death had struck her. Yes, he was going: she saw it in that unearthly luster—she saw it in the burning hectic: she clung to him—in tears, now, in wild, unbounded distress.

"You shall take me with you, my husband. Parker, don't leave me—you are all, everything to me, now. I shall die if you go without me."

"Virginia," he cried, brokenly.

"Yes, Parker, your home shall be mine, no matter how humble. I am nearer to you than any other, before God. My mother will be cared for, she will mourn a little while, and then forget me. Besides, she will see me sometimes; Florida would let me come to my own mother, cold-hearted as she is."

As Virginia began this passionate entreaty, there was a stealthy footfall near by, which she heard not. Florida, impelled by an irresistible curiosity (to give the action its best interpretation) had stolen from the refreshment room, and now stood concealed where she could hear much that was said.

"Virginia—no—not yet," he said, in a broken voice; "I—am not able," he groaned, as if the confession were forced from him; "perhaps, as you have said, in a few weeks, even days, better times may come; let us wait, darling."

Virginia had moved from his shoulder. She was pale but tearless.

"Well, Parker, I *will* wait, since you decide that it is best; but remember, it will be only for a little while. And if you are ill, promise you will send for me, Parker. Will you?"

"Yes, Virginia—but it will be only to say a final farewell," he added, under his breath.

There was a stir; the people were coming from supper. Virginia quietly led the way into a room that was little frequented.

"Sit down and rest," she said; "you have been standing too long, and I thoughtlessly allowed it."

He sunk down, with a sigh of relief, upon one of the crimson couches. Virginia stole away and returned with some softly-perfumed lotion, with which she bathed his brow; then going again, she playfully bade him sleep for a moment till she should return. A delicious sense of rest pervaded his whole being—how seldom had he been thus cared for. It brought hot tears to his eyes, the thought of his loneliness.

Again Virginia's step broke upon his repose. She carried a china plate, with tempting pears that lay grouped like a picture in its midst. From her other hand swung a small silver basket heaped with luscious grapes, shining like emeralds.

"You are thirsty, I know," she said, quietly placing them before him. "Now eat and be thankful," she added.

"If you will help me," he made reply; and they sat there like children, each pleased because the other was.

"You are not so desponding now," murmured Virginia.

"Not quite," he answered, pleasantly.

"And you will believe better days are coming?"

"I will—when I see them," he added, with a faithless smile.

"Not even there?" whispered Virginia, softly. He glanced toward her. Her hand and her eyes were elevated toward heaven, and a sweet and serene grace shone on her features.

"Virginia, you are too good for me," said Parker.

"I have no trust—no faith in anything. God does not care for me."

"Has He not sent me to be your comforter?" asked Virginia, reprovingly.

"Yes, yes, darling, and I thank and bless Him for it." His face brightened; he arose, and, drawing her toward him, kissed her again and again. "Yes, darling, my courage is rising. We shall, perhaps, be happy together yet."

"And then the book."

"Oh! yes, the dear book. Do you know, in the midst of all my mental anxiety, I have written nearly a hundred pages."

"That is beautiful!" cried Virginia, clapping her hands together. "If I could only hear you read them! But the time will come. Now about home. Do you see the dear old cottage often?"

"Every day," he replied; "you know, of course, that Bartol, the gardener, has hired the place. I expect he will make it a little paradise. I half like Florida for her determination not to sell it. But I must go," he added, rising. "They are dancing, I suppose. Shall you join them?"

"No, indeed," responded Virginia, "I never dance. I shall go straight to mother's room."

"Good-night, my blessed, blessed wife."

"Good-night."

One moment they were folded in a close embrace; the next, Florida was looking in, a strange gleam in her eyes.

"Oh! here you are, Virginia; I've been looking for you everywhere. Good-evening, Mr. Parker; you are better, I hope. Virginia. Mr. Leighton says you must remember your promise to him."

"My promise to him," murmured Virginia, bewildered; "I did not promise him anything."

"You know best what I mean. I am sure you do not wish to provoke remark; but this withdrawing yourself to the remotest part of the house may occasion talk. Were you going?" she asked, turning to Parker.

"You see I have my hat in my hand," he said casting an angry look at her. As for Virginia, she stood trembling under the influence of a strange spell—a feeling of helplessness that came over her if Florida disputed her will—she stood, now and then looking imploringly at Parker.

"Good-night, sir," said Florida, coldly.

"Good-night," he answered, between his teeth; and he rushed from the room like one in a sudden rage.

"Oh, Florida! how unkind! how cruel you are!" cried Virginia.

"And you—I am surprised at your want of propriety," exclaimed Florida, sternly.

"It was perfectly proper to stay with my—" she dashed the tears from her eyes—stopped short; she dreaded to commit herself yet.

"Your lover, I suppose you would say," replied Florida, with a sneer: "perhaps, *betrothed*. If so, I wish you joy of your (future) penniless and nameless husband. Virginia, let me tell you in a few words, that misery and misfortune will attend you if you marry that man. And further, Horace Dudley loves you—Horace Dudley, the very pick and cream of B— society, with a fortune at his command. Mr. Le Roy told me; he knows, for he corresponds with Mr. Dudley. Come, here's a sweet morsel to dream on. They are asking for you, and you must go with me."

"I can not," murmured Virginia; "don't urge me, Florida. Let me retire quietly to my room."

"I wish you to go, Virginia; come." She laid her hand on her shoulder. Virginia shuddered—looked once in Florida's eyes, and followed her with the instinctive dread with which a noble hound follows a cruel master.

In the different rooms varied amusements were in progress. A charming balladist had sung; several recitations had given unalloyed pleasure; and the lecturer on science was holding forth to a select few. Magnitism was the subject under consideration, as Florida and Virginia entered the room.

"Suppose you give us some exhibition of your skill," said a short, thick-set, curly-haired individual, who, from his extreme elegance and laughable dignity, was often called the Duke of Somerset—plain Harry Somerset being his name.

At that moment the lecturer caught the eye of Virginia. Completely in the power of one positive nature as she was, the passivity of her system felt the will that was being silently exercised. Left to

herself, she went slowly up to the professor, and stopped short a few paces distant. He motioned her to sit down, and she obeyed him. She was in precisely the circumstances to be acted upon by a powerful mind. He advanced and fixed his gaze steadily upon her. The crowd was hushed—Florida stood by, breathless and eager. Virginia sunk back, still smiling; and closing her eyes, with an occasional struggle against drowsiness that was fast creeping over her, she was soon asleep.

"This is a splendid subject," said the professor, looking eagerly round. "The whole thing has been done almost without the consent of either. Madam," he added, addressing Florida, "perhaps you will prefer to be put in communication with your sister."

Florida shrunk back for a moment; then, with heightened color, assented. She stood before Virginia, who shuddered a little, but soon gave signs of being entirely under her control. With the help of directions from the professor, Florida made the unconscious girl respond to her thoughts.

"It is wonderful," said the professor; "a case of true clairvoyance. In time, if you wished to make a series of experiments, you could send her to the ends of the earth—a splendid subject," he reiterated.

Florida's heart bounded with a secret exultation, as she thus found herself in a way to use the power she had felt herself abundantly provided with. She waked the sleeping girl, and together they left the room—Virginia to retire, wholly unconscious of what she had said or done.

CHAPTER XII.

STRICKEN AND AFFLICTED.

WHEN Parker went from the party that night, his blood was boiling. Florida both by manner and speech, had insulted him, and Virginia—could she deceive him? He could not believe that: what Florida had said was but to wound and mislead him. Walking rapidly on, almost without thought or purpose, he knew not whither, only that he must go, a sudden sense of utter prostration came upon him. He leaned for a moment against the railing of the bridge which he had gained, with the impression that he was dying. Growing fainter as he stood, he gradually slid down upon the wooden planks. It was midnight, but just over him a lamp sent down a dim ray sufficient to disclose him, should a chance passenger go by. His hands hung nerveless, his face looked blue and ghastly in the wavering light.

Some minutes elapsed, but the stillness was unbroken by the foot of man. A little gurgling ripple told that the waters were rising to cover the weedy beams beneath. Mingled with this came the rumble of slow wheels. A teamster who had taken advantage of a good bargain to visit the theater, was making his way homeward. Full of the startling scenes that had passed before him, he was not a little frightened, as he entered on the bridge, to see, as he thought, a dead body lying not two feet from his cart. At first he was for applying the whip and driving on; but a feeling of humanity impelled him, upon second thought, to get down and see if there was life there, or if the man had been foully dealt by. He went cautiously forward, then, with a spring and a bound, he was at the side of the fallen man.

"By the living hokey!" he soliloquized, in tones of astonishment, "if there isn't the schoolmaster! poor fellow!—and dead as a door-nail, I do believe."

He touched him upon the cheek—shook him by the shoulder, but there was no sign of animation.

"What am I to do?" muttered the man, looking uneasily around. "I'll get him in the cart and stop at the doctor's over the bridge. Maybe he's only in a faint like."

Depositing the body upon some straw in the bottom of his wagon, the kind-hearted teamster jogged along. As he stopped in front of the doctor's house, a mile from the bridge, he heard a faint groan.

"Well, well, Mr. Parker," he said, leaning over, "you're come to, are you?"

"Who is it—and where am I?" was the faint response.

"Jim Cuttle—in A—," answered the teamster. "Found you onto the beginning of the bridge, putty well done for."

"You have stopped—where are we now?" asked the invalid, feebly.

"Well, we're to the doctor's—I was going to put you aboard of him."

"No—if you please, Jim, take me right home. I know what to do for myself when I get there."

"Anything to suit," replied the man, gathering up the reins and driving on.

Parker persisted in being left at the door, in not disturbing the family, which was none of the pleasantest, and the good teamster gave a lift, so that he gained the shed-roof with apparent ease, and in a few moments was in his own room. Here, again, he felt entirely prostrated—a burning fever raged through his veins, a blinding pain in the temples almost deprived him of reason. Besides these were the old difficulties—the struggle for breath, the cruel pain at his heart. All night he lay in agony, and the morning brought him no relief. The struggle with the deadly disease had taken all strength from him, and he was so utterly ill that he did not attempt to leave his bed the following day.

Virginia, on that same morning, awoke, a sad, depressing weight upon her spirit. Again and again she thought over the events of the past night. Parker had left her suddenly, but not in anger with her—that was impossible. She knew not how to account for the darkness that seemed spread over her like a gloomy pall. Of what had happened after he had gone, she had, of course, no recollection, save that she had entered the brilliant room and emerged therefrom thoroughly exhausted. And to day she dared not look forward to happiness. Continual sighs rose to her lips, and the weary thought was ever uppermost, "What shall I do for Parker?"

After breakfast she took the morning paper and looked its columns listlessly through. One notice attracted her attention. It read thus:

"OFFICE OF GERALD LE ROY,
"No. 19 Dupont Buildings."

It flashed across her soul like a ray of blessed light that to him she might apply with safety. She had long seen how intensely he loved Florida, and if he thought a visit unmaidenly, her motive would excuse her. She already looked upon him as a brother, hoping that Florida would be his wife, and she determined to find him, and lay the case of Parker (it should never come to *his* knowledge) before him. After carefully attending to her mother, who did not seem as well as usual, having been under the influence of strong opiates all night, after arranging the flowers for the little stand that stood always near the sick chair, she arrayed herself for a walk.

"See here, Jenny," said her mother, childishly. Virginia lifted her vail and went toward her mother.

"See, child—I haven't written my name before for so many years. Pretty good for an old sick woman, isn't it?"

"Yes, mother—but what set you to writing?"

"Oh, Florry did it, dear—she wanted me to put my name to something, I don't know what, and so she set me to practicing, as if I was a child, Jenny," and a little feeble laugh accompanied the speech.

"And do you know what you signed, mother?" asked Virginia, who, little as she knew of such things, felt that a signature of that kind was too important to be given lightly.

"Bless your heart—no, darling, I don't know as I do. Florry explained, and said something about some property; but—my poor memory—I forget."

"Was anybody here at the time?"

"Only Sarah and the other woman—they wrote

their names, too, but I don't believe t'was as good as mine, do you, Jenny?"

Virginia did not answer. If Florida wanted witnesses for the signing of the signature, why did she not call her, or some more responsible person? Clearly, this must be a plot of Florida's to obtain absolute command of the business, or control of the property. Still, having no counselor, she knew not what to do in the case. She was too proud to let Florida know that she suspected her, and too innately delicate to take any roundabout way to ascertain the facts. She kissed her mother, and accompanied still by her thoughts, left the house and walked toward the Dupont buildings.

The office of Mr. Le Roy was very beautifully furnished, with rosewood, marble, and paneling *a la fresco*, with tapestry carpets and gilded chandeliers. Le Roy met her with a cordial smile, led her to a seat, and observing her gaze warily round, assured her that no one was present but a deaf clerk, who scribbled away, his back toward them.

"I—don't know whether I ought to have come," said Virginia, looking up and then down in an embarrassed way, "but I thought of you, and that you would do me a favor if you could."

"Certainly, Miss Virginia, you counted upon me rightly there. Anything in my power I will do to serve you. What is it—one or five hundred dollars for some sweet charity?"

Virginia glanced up in amazement. Money offered her by the hundreds? Why, she had scarce ever had so many cents.

"Oh, you are very kind, Mr. Le Roy; but it was not money I wanted. I came for a friend—though that friend knows nothing about it—and if you can do what I wish, please consider it a great secret."

He smiled at her in a half-dignified manner.

"You may depend upon me, Miss Virginia," he said.

"Well, then—" her color grew high—after all, it was not as easy a matter as it had seemed. "Perhaps, Mr. Le Roy," she said, beginning again—"perhaps you noticed the young man—the stranger that came in last night."

Le Roy started to his feet—said, "Please excuse me for a moment, Miss Virginia," and went to his desk, remaining fully a minute fumbling among and turning over papers for which he seemed to have no earthly use. When he came back he seated himself very slowly, half-turning away, however, so that but part of his face was in sight.

"Well—about this young man?" he said, and his voice seemed altered.

"If you could only get a situation in some school for him, sir. He is not well—not fit for the exertion of finding the place. I think, perhaps, he would like a clerkship. Oh! sir, you must not think it strange that I, a young—woman, plead for him. He was my teacher in the town where we lived before we came to the city, and he has been very unfortunate all his life long. I ask for him as I would for a brother."

Her voice rung musically sad and low through the large room.

"How old is this young teacher?" he asked, after a pause.

"Old?—not quite twenty-one, I believe."

"Does he want a situation in the city?"

"I think he would prefer that."

"Has he—any—parents living?"

Virginia crimsoned to the temples as she answered, "His mother is dead, I believe."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Le Roy, turning hastily round, "who told you that?"

"He told me, sir," she said.

He looked at her keenly, then threw himself back in his chair. After a pause he said, slowly:

"I think I can serve you—serve this young friend of yours, Miss Virginia."

"Oh! you are so kind!" she exclaimed breathless. "How happy it will make him. But you never'll tell?"

He smiled again. "No, I will never tell," he said, gravely. "Suppose I get him a good place, and then suppose I put the task of disposing of it upon you?"

"I am entirely willing," she said, simply.

"Very well. I will get the place, and a tip-top place it shall be, too. I love to oblige my friends, so you may set the young man down for a thousand dollars a year, certain—perhaps fifteen hundred."

Oh! how the blood surged all over that young face! how the eye sparkled with the fullness of delight!

"I do thank you so much, Mr. Le Roy," she said, her eyes showing the gratitude she felt.

"You are entirely welcome, Miss Virginia. I never did a favor with more pleasure in my life. I assure you I am quite happy that you came, and at any time, when you are on your rounds of charity, call upon me. Stop—I have by me a little money unappropriated. I always delegate my friends to do my charitable acts, for I confess to no discrimination of that sort. Please accept this fifty dollars, and make some sad hearts happy."

Virginia could not refuse—she was so much astonished by this magnificent liberality. She took the note mechanically, wondering in her mind to what she could apply it.

"I really don't know any very poor people," she said, timidly.

"Oh! you'll find them," he replied. "They swarm here; but I'm always ready to help if I find them worthy; but I don't like the trouble of going to see about it. Now for you it would be a nice little exercise;" and he smiled, making Virginia's heart leap at the fancied resemblance in his face to another she had certainly seen and loved.

He bowed her out, bewildered and happy, questioning if she were indeed the same girl who had entered trembling and fearful. She went home on wings, keeping her great gladness to herself, and only wishing she had asked him not to tell Florida. That she could easily do, however.

A note was immediately dispatched to Parker, and, occupied in the duties and lessons of the day, Virginia enjoyed it moment by moment. Now and then she would be lost in the sweet anticipation of what Parker would say, how he would look, and with what an ecstasy of delight she should meet him—for that he would come directly there she was certain.

All that day and all that evening was the expected note anxiously looked for, but vainly—and the poor girl retired to rest with sad forebodings.

It might have been about ten of the following day that Florida, who was busy with some feminine duty, suddenly paused, exclaiming, "I forgot it entirely—there is a letter in my escritoire that came for you yesterday. I'll get it this moment."

In her pleasure at the good news, Virginia did not stop to wonder, as she might at another time, if this was not some adroit planning of Florida's. She tried to restrain her eagerness when the white envelope came in sight, but at Florida's exclamation, "The superscription looks tipsy," she smiled, and caught at it eagerly.

"It is for joy," she thought. Alas, poor eager heart! These words met her frightened gaze:

"DEAR MISS:—The schoolmaster is very sick indeed and senses nothing. I think he is dying—and the troubles and expenses which if he is not will be too much for us poor folks and so I hope you will see to it or get some of your friends to take care of him,

"Yours,

T. F. WALKER,

"His boardin' house."

"Oh! Florida!" cried Virginia, with a glance of anguish—and before her startled sister could reach her, she was lying death-white against the side of the couch upon which she had been seated.

"Fainted," muttered Florida. "I'm glad I never faint." A glance through the letter made her cheek paler, her lips quiver. "Now I can go to him," she

said, and after Virginia was somewhat restored, she reverted to the note.

"What shall you do about it, Virginia?"

"Oh! I don't know—God help me! Why! go, of course," she cried, starting up, but falling back again from sheer weakness.

"Well, well, compose yourself, Virginia. I will have the carriage brought out—I will go with you."

"Oh! but why did you keep the note? He may be—" her lips refused to say the word.

"I tell you I forgot it," said Florida. "I was thinking about a thousand things, and talking with Mr. Le Roy."

"Oh! and he knows nothing of it, and he so kind too!" cried Virginia, distressingly, wringing her hands.

"He knows nothing about it—why of course not!" exclaimed Florida, her face flushing. "Why should he?"

"He was going to get him a situation, worth a thousand dollars; perhaps more—it would have made Parker so happy if he could only have had my letters in time! It may be he has;" and the poor girl gained strength from the very thought. "Oh! let us go, let us go this minute."

Florida went out, still wondering what Le Roy had said—and why he had taken an interest in a nameless boy. She ordered grapes and a few delicacies, and in less than an hour Florida and Virginia were on their way to the old town of their former residence.

On arriving at the cottage Florida rung the bell. A woman came to the door; she looked at her in surprise.

"Is Mr. Parker, the teacher, in?" asked Florida, with apparent unconcern.

"No, Miss Owen," replied the woman.

"Not in?" queried Florida in real alarm, while Virginia pressed her hands over her head and gasped with mingled grief and terror.

"Walk in, and I'll tell you all about it," said the woman.

"A gentleman came for him," she added, as they seated themselves.

"A gentleman came for him?" echoed both Virginia and Florida, simultaneously.

"And found him dreadful sick. I thought he was dying. And so about two hours after that a splendid city carriage came, and two men took him. They said they had orders, and were going to have proper doctor's attendance, and so of course, I said nothing. I had all I could do to get him ready."

Florida looked at her sister. A faint color had come into Virginia's cheek—the color of hope.

"What kind of a looking man was he who first came?" asked Florida.

"Oh! a tall man—a large man with reddish hair and reddish whiskers."

"And did they say nothing of where they should take him?"

"Not a word, miss—I thought it was all right, of course. He—the first gentleman, paid handsomely for what he owed for board, and for the nursing we'd did. They covered him close with the best blankets and over them a splendid gentleman's shawl of the nicest kind; but poor boy—I never shall forget how his eyes looked when they took him. If they'd been set for death, 'twouldn't been much worse."

Virginia uttered a cry of pain.

The woman hastened to add: "But then I guess they were going to do well by him. They took every thing that belonged to him—it wasn't much, you may be sure—a few shirts and handkerchiefs, and lots and lots of paper, scribbled upon. He used to be writing nightly all the time."

"What can it mean?" murmured Florida, who had paid little or no heed to the woman's hurried talk. "Virginia, what can it mean?"

"And how shall we ever find him?" queried Virginia. "Where have they taken him?"

"It's no use sitting here," said Florida. "I think it's rather strange you didn't inquire the gentleman's name—or where they were taking him."

"La! I didn't think about the name; as to the other, I did ask more'n once, but they wouldn't tell."

"Never mind, Virginia, we'll find out some way," said Florida. Her sister could have kissed her for those words. At last her heart was touched, at last she was interested. Oh! yes, Virginia would not despair. But who were the friends thus kind? Could Mr. Le Roy be one? He had seemed so much interested, that for a few moments there was no doubt in her mind, but that he was the prime mover in the affair. Then the thought of his words flashed through her mind: "I always delegate my friends to do my charitable acts." If it was indeed so, she should not be long in suspense, and she longed to fly homeward that her anxiety might be set at rest.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CLAIRVOYANT.

"Did you say you wanted a private room, sir?"

"Yes, one of the best you have in the house."

"We charge very high for such accommodations."

"Charge a hundred dollars a week, if you please, only don't keep me waiting. You will find your money promptly paid attendants, nursing, food, everything. It is not at all likely the young man will recover, and I wish him, while he lives, to have the best of everything."

"Certainly, sir; we can please you, I think," said the civil superintendent, who saw at once he was dealing with a man of means. "When do you require the room?"

"To-day—within an hour. I have just sent for him, and of course you can accommodate yourself to a case of great emergency."

"Oh! yes, sir; but what name? We might as well settle preliminaries now."

"Certainly—yes," and the man looked perplexed for a moment. "Where is your register?"

It was pointed out. The gentleman took his gold pen from his pocket with a business air, and wrote:

"William Garret, and family."

"Now I am ready to pay any sum you say, in advance."

"Thank you, sir; that is our rule with strangers. Fifty dollars in advance is the amount we expect."

It was paid.

"Have the very best of medical attendance; you see in what a substantial way I shall be able to thank you," and he smiled grimly. "If he wants any luxury, any clothing, get them for him and charge it to me. I am in something of a hurry, and must leave the matter in your hands for the present. The patient will be here in an hour. Good-morning."

"Good-morning, sir," and the superintendent bowed him out.

The man hurried away. He was noticeable only for a large frame, and long, reddish-yellow hair, that hung lake-like upon the collar of his coat. Besides that, he wore a beard, flaming red, and stooped a little.

Florida and Virginia reached home, still speculating upon the probabilities of the case. How to discover the persons implicated in the abduction—for it seemed like a forcible taking away—was now the hinge upon which their discovery must turn. The tall man with red hair! Florida searched her memory, but she could not think of any person of that description who had ever made himself visible to her.

Still it impressed her that Le Roy had something to do with the matter; and she determined to watch him narrowly. He did not come that night; the next day he called, called as he was wonting by, he said, "Virginia and Florida were both at home; but Florida, not being prepared to receive company, sent Virginia down in her stead."

"My dear Miss Virginia—how is your health? I have not seen you since the day you honored me with a call. And by the way, I have succeeded in procuring a fine situation for your young friend.

Come, what do you say to a salary of fourteen hundred, and a good deal of spare time besides?"

Virginia's heart sunk.

"Oh! Mr. Le Roy—then of course you don't know. We both half hoped you would."

"My child—you are enigmatical."

"I don't wonder you don't understand. We went out to see poor Parker, and we couldn't find him."

"What! Florida, too?" asked Mr. Le Roy in a strange voice.

"Yes, Florida, too. We found he had been taken away—oh dear! where have they carried him?"

At that moment Florida entered.

"I suppose Virginia has told you of our wild-goose chase this morning?"

"Virginia has told me; it is a somewhat singular case. Could you get no clew whatever?"

"None," was her reply. "I can't imagine what were their motives. I never knew that he had friends, personally interested, in the city."

"You might inquire at the hospitals."

Virginia's face brightened.

"Yes, that might be done, if—it was worth while," and Florida glanced at Virginia, half smiling.

"If you don't find him there, why go to the first clairvoyant you know. They can tell everything," he said, with a mocking laugh.

He had forgotten the trial at the party—not so Florida. All at once her heart beat wildly—the power within her was at work.

"Virginia!" she said for the girl had fastened her eyes upon her in a startled way.

At that moment the music-teacher was ushered in. Virginia drew a long breath as she met his glance; she walked rapidly away to the music-room whither Florida soon followed her, for Mr. Le Roy had excused himself, and taken his leave.

Florida entered the room quite silently, and stationed herself at the window, a peculiar look in her eyes. For a time Virginia went on smoothly, but soon a restless mood seized her. She seemed not to hear the professor, but to be listening to something far away. Presently her fingers fell listless from the keys.

"You are ill, or tired, miss," said the professor.

"I really can't go on with my lesson," she said earnestly.

"Very well—as miss pleases. Shall I come to-morrow?"

"It is foolish to give way to this feeling," cried Virginia pettishly. "I will go on if you are not tired to death of me."

"Oh! no, miss," and the professor gave a little admiring look.

Again she pressed the keys, went on very well for some minutes—the same listlessness came over her; she turned slowly round, encountering the dark orbs of her sister, and saying, earnestly:

"Florida, what do you wish of me?"

"Nothing, child," replied her sister, a flash of triumph lighting up her face. "If I trouble you I will go. It wants half an hour of my lesson-time."

She went out, smiling. Virginia resumed her playing, and this time she succeeded more to her satisfaction. Still she could not forget that strange impression, and wondered if it was possible to be in the power of a human being, and whether those weird old stories of evil spirits holding the weak in bondage could by any possibility be true.

Florida drove to the hospitals—there were three within a circuit of six miles. They had taken no one of that name. Then, when several weeks had passed, she determined to profit by the suggestion of Le Roy and put Virginia to sleep.

A wet, uncomfortable evening without doors excluded all callers. Florida seated herself by the low table on which her work-box stood, and fumbled among spools and scissors, her eyes all the time traveling to a shaded corner, where Virginia, thoroughly exhausted with sorrow, lay, pale and listless.

Every now and then Virginia moved uneasily—

every now and then she sighed. Florida, after a few moments of indecision, folded her hands before her on the table till they looked like the locked fingers of stone, and, fixing her dark eyes upon Virginia, she sat as rigid as if transformed into a statue. For some moments she was thus motionless—not a nerve stirring, not a lash of those large, still darkening eyes moving—until a little fluttering noise was heard. It was the folds of Virginia's dress that divided the silence with the ticking of the French clock on the mantle-piece.

After another short silence, Virginia raised her head, and looked out eagerly into the room. Then she lifted herself slowly, sat upright, gazing toward Florida with a pathetic, imploring look, and finally she came slowly toward her with the question:

"Did you call me, Florida? What do you want of me?"

"Sit down there," said Florida, motioning her to a seat.

She obeyed, and sat looking at her, like a helpless thing, fascinated and fearful. Shudder after shudder passed over her frame. Then she closed her eyes as one in a deep sleep, and thus sat, almost smiling, as if mind and body were at rest.

"Virginia," said Florida, her voice terribly earnest, "I want you to go and find Parker."

The slight fingers of the young girl began to intertwine; her face took on an almost superhuman look of interest, and she rocked her body as if to the motion of a walk.

"Go find him, Virginia," said Florida, sternly.

"It's very dark," said Virginia, shuddering; "how wet the streets are! But I must go—on—on—I must find him. Here is gas-light—ever so many gas-lights—I shall get on finely now. I am not afraid—the watchmen are out. How it rains! how it rains!"

"Nobody will harm you, Virginia. Think of Parker, and go right on."

"Oh! yes, Parker—poor Parker! I must find him—nobody knows where he is—I am going to him. Oh! what a large place—a square!"

There was a long silence, during which only the expressive face spoke, in dimpling smiles, or in a heavenly seriousness of aspect. Florida exclaimed at last:

"Well, Virginia, do you think you shall find him?"

"Oh! yes," she said, quickly. "I'm going right up to the hospital here."

"What hospital?"

"I can't see yet. There are lamps over the steps, a great many steps, and the windows are all lighted. Now I'm going to the door. It's a gloomy place," she said, with a sigh. "Oh! ever and ever so many beds, all in a row. I wonder if he's here?" She began to turn her head earnestly from side to side, looking scrutinizingly, and now and then sighing heavily.

"I've been all through the sick wards—I don't see him. But I think he's here, somewhere."

"Go all over the building," whispered Florida, who was almost terrified at the wonderful exhibition of this subtle agent of her mind.

"The doctor is just going up-stairs," said Virginia.

"Follow him," said Florida.

"Yes, yes. I'll go after the doctor." There was a long pause; then with uplifted hands, she cried out, her face brilliant with joy, "Oh! I've found him! I've found him!"

"Are you sure?" queried Florida.

"Sure?" her very voice laughed music; "sure? oh! don't I know Parker?" and her hand began to wave as if she were stroking down soft, silken hair.

"How does he look?" queried Florida, with a half curious glance.

"Oh! so white! so pale! so wasted away!" The tears began to start. "The doctor is speaking to him now; now he is giving him something in a glass goblet from a silver spoon."

"What kind of a place is he in, Virginia?"

"In a beautiful room, with blue paper, and white lace curtains over blue silk. He is very comfortable,

for his pillows are so large and downy. Then there are some alabaster images opposite, and—why, how odd!" she cried, sudden amazement changing her description into exclamation.

"What is odd, Virginia?"

"The doctor calls him Mr. Garnet. Why, it is certainly Parker. I can not be mistaken."

"They have changed his name to prevent his being found out," murmured Florida.

"Yes, that is it," Virginia said, having overheard; "that must be it. Oh! dear Parker! I wish I might stay and nurse him," her lip quivered again.

"Can you find out what hospital it is?" asked Florida, hurriedly.

Virginia seemed looking round for a moment. "There is a Bible on the table," she said. "Yes, it is printed on the cover—'The Grove Hospital!'"

Florida hastily wrote it down beside the name that had been given as that of the sick man.

"That will do. You may come back, now," said Florida gently.

Still, Virginia seemed unwilling, and it was not without great effort that Florida could draw her mind from what was impressed thereon. She led her to her old nook, and there, after some difficulty, awakened her.

Virginia looked up, startled; gazed about her, pressed her hand to her forehead confusedly, then murmured, looking in Florida's face:

"My head aches." She sighed so heavily, and looked so haggard, that Florida turned her face away. The look and the sigh both reproached her.

"I think I must have been dreaming of Parker," said Virginia, wearily. "I dream of him so much—and he is always suffering. Oh, Florida! trouble is so very wearying—trouble of any sort; but this—this great trial. The suspense is awful! Oh! if we only knew where Parker was!" and she burst into tears.

"Virginia, you will be sick if you mourn in this way," said Florida. "I insist upon your going to bed."

Her sister said no more, but quietly left the room, still weeping.

Florida sat down to muse upon the wonderful exhibition in which she had been the prime actor. Was it true? She had the means of proof in her own hands. "Grove Street Hospital—Mr. Garnet." At any rate, she would soon know. And if he was really there, this wonderful power might—she shuddered. Unscrupulous as she could be, she yet shrunk from the deed but half contemplated.

"But, if Virginia should find Mr. Dudley more suited to her tastes, her position—and undoubtedly she will—it will be better for her, and better for us all. This very evening's work has proved how weak she is, how submissive. She will mourn for awhile, but after a time forget."

CHAPTER XIV.

FLORIDA'S VISIT—A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

"Doctor," called Parker, one evening, some six weeks from the date of his arrival, "I am getting stronger, am I not?"

"Something stronger, but you are weak yet, Mr. Garnet."

"Mr. Parker Hillman, if you please," said Parker. "You will persist in calling me Garnet."

"That is the name on the book, and according to the ordinances of the house you are Mr. Garnet, while you stay here."

"Oh! well, it doesn't matter, particularly—but, doctor, can I write a letter?"

"Not yet," said the doctor, decidedly.

"Well, doctor, you will at least tell me why I am here, and who brought me?"

"You are here to be taken care of," was the reply. "As to who brought you, I cannot tell. The gentleman has not been near you since, and we only hear from him by letter."

"But what does he sign himself?"

"That I do not know," replied the doctor, "as I have seen none of the letters."

"Has no one called here, then?—no lady?"

"No one. The nurse will be in immediately," added the doctor, as he left the room.

"What will Virginia think?" he cried in a low voice, clasping his hands.

The door opened. The nurse, a portly woman, entered with an air of mystery.

"I don't know whether it's quite right," she said, "though I haven't had any orders. But there's a lady called, and wishes to see Mr. Garnet."

"A lady!" his cheeks flushed in an instant. He half raised himself, then sunk back, exhausted.

"There now—it won't do, I see that," said the nurse, in her severest tone.

"Oh! yes—I'm all right now. I promise you I'll be very canny. I wonder who it is?"

"The dear knows," replied the nurse. "She came in a carriage, but she wouldn't give her name."

"Oh! if it is but Virginia," whispered Parker.

"Tell her to come. I'm sure it will make me better, just to see a face I have known."

The nurse went out; in less than a moment she returned, and following her was Florida. He looked eagerly beyond. His eye brightened as he saw her, but dulled again, as he saw *not* Virginia.

"Parker!" she exclaimed, in a voice that she tried to make even.

"Did Virginia send you?" he asked.

"No," her voice grew calm in an instant.

"Oh! Florida—didn't Virginia send one word—one token?"

"Virginia knew nothing of my coming."

She touched his pale forehead, she smoothed back the light hair.

"Thank you; how soothing that is," he murmured, dreamily. "Florida, I'm sure you're very kind to come—I always thought you disliked me."

"I never disliked you," said Florida, hoarsely, still eagerly stroking back the soft locks. "But it is not in my nature, to show a great deal of tenderness. Your head feels better now, does it not?"

"Oh! a great deal; there seems a magnetic influence in the motion. You are very kind. Do you know how I came here?"

"You were brought here, I suppose," said Florida smiling.

"Yes, but by whom? Who takes so strong an interest in me?—for these things can not be had for nothing. Are you wholly in the dark, too?"

"Wholly in the dark, Parker. We went out to see you, hearing how sick you were, and you had been taken away by strangers."

"We"—you say: was Virginia with you?"

"Yes," replied Florida, shortly, her face clouding though she still pressed his forehead lightly.

"And she—of course, she was disappointed."

"We were both disappointed."

He closed his eyes for a moment.

"It seems so good to see you," he resumed; "my nerves are so quiet now! Your touch is healing."

Florida smiled.

"Is Virginia—well?"

"Yes," said Florida.

"Will you bring her with you if you come again?"

"If it is possible," replied Florida, still pressing the waxen forehead. He closed his eyes again; an almost infantile smile lingered along his lips. He slept—his repose seemed so complete that Florida sat and gazed upon him, unconscious how swiftly the time was passing. Once she bent down and touched the white brow with her lips. He smiled in his sleep.

"Oh! if he would smile on me that way when he wakes!" she cried with a passionate sob—"but he will, he shall."

She lifted her hand from his forehead. The motion aroused him.

"I am very impolite to go to sleep in the presence of a lady, but my weakness must be my apology," he said.

"You need not apologize. How do you feel now?"

"Oh! strong—delightfully strong," he said. "I wish you would come often. I seem to have had a whole night in sleep and pleasant dreams. I have done me good."

"I must go now, Parker; it is later than I thought."

Good-morning."

He held her hand, murmuring his thanks for her kindness. Then he carried it to his lips. Florida's heart beat with a strange mingling of love and pain. Her voice choked as she said good-by again.

Florida drove rapidly home.

On her next visit to Parker she found him quite pale and dejected. He was sitting up however, and her presence seemed to give him instant strength.

"Do you know what worries me and takes away the vitality I need?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"The constant desire to get well, and find out who are these friends so careful of me; and the disappointment of not receiving letters from Virginia."

"Was Virginia, then, so dear a friend? and cannot I take her place?"

He started, violently, and crimsoned; his breath grew short even to gasping, but after a few moments he controlled himself.

"You do not know," he said calmly, though his previous emotion just tinged his voice, "you do not know what Virginia was to me."

"And could it be possible that she professed—" she had touched delicate ground, and, like a woman, shrunk back from the subject.

"Florida—Virginia, I had hoped, loved me very much," he said, mournfully.

"Then she is changed, Parker—she permits the visits of a lover. She is no longer true."

"A lover!" he exclaimed, his white face growing almost stony. "No longer true—good God! She, *she my wife!* no longer true. It is a lie, woman—false as hell!"

Florida shrunk from the glittering eyes, the panting bosom, the wild demeanor. But all these affected her as nothing to the words—"my wife!" They sent her heart blood surging back in waves of fire. She had never dreamed of this.

"Your wife, Parker?"

"Yes, Florida—oh! unsay those cruel words; my very heart is bleeding. See, you have broken my heart, and it is bleeding upon my lips."

Florida shrunk again, both conscience and terror-stricken, as he wiped the crimson life-tide away. Once in possession of that knowledge, she had nothing more to do with him—nothing more to do with herself, save to trample upon the wild love that had burned in her bosom for years for him. She had intended to use her power upon the weak frame to wrest his love, as it were, from her gentle sister—but not now. No—she would leave him—at once and forever. What she might do she knew not; for the present she would do nothing.

All this flashed through her mind with lightning-like rapidity, and almost before he had displayed the alarming tokens of his disease.

"Parker, I did not dream of this," she said, slowly, like one coming out of a vision.

"Oh! if you have any love for me, unsay what you said. Virginia false? My wife false?"

"I will take it back, Parker," Florida said, hollowly. "I will throw the matter upon her sole responsibility. If she comes to see you within the week, I absolve her from any desire to love or feel interest in another."

"It is terrible to have this suggestion to feed upon," said Parker, lying back, exhausted. "I hoped everything from Virginia—I should die, deprived of hope. It is all soul and body have had to live upon for many a day. Don't kill me outright. Tell her to write—oh! send me a line from her. No human being was ever loved as I love her."

Florida's rebel spirit rose. Anger was slowly but surely taking the place of pity. How had Virginia dared to act thus in direct defiance of her wishes,

knowledge? The old hard hate came up and the right that was faintly battling in her for supremacy. Her husband he might be—shrunk from calling him brother.

Even at that moment, Horace Dudley was telling his love to Virginia. Her cheek was blanched to snow-whiteness when he spoke. She held out whiter hands, aghast.

"Oh! Mr. Dudley, have mercy, have pity!" she cried. "I can not love you—you must not love me. I—am already a wife."

He flung at her a strange look, almost of despair—then arose and walked hastily across the room. She, nearly fainting, frightened at her own words, drooped forward, till her face leaned on her hands, and the tears rained through her fingers.

"Virginia."

The voice soothed while it roused her. She lifted her frightened face.

"Tell me all, Virginia, and why this not been known. Let me be now as a brother to you, my poor, timid, trembling dove." And, resting with a sweet confidence, as new as it was strange, upon his friendship, she told him all.

"I see you are afraid of this sister, Florida. She has held you in iron bonds."

"You will forgive me," said Virginia, holding out her hand.

A spasm crossed his face.

"I have nothing to forgive, my dear; on the contrary, as an honorable man, I feel bound to aid you by every means in my power. We must find this husband of yours. There is some secret reason why he has been spirited away. Who knows," and he tried to laugh, "but we may find him heir to wealth and honors? Such things have happened."

"You deserve to be loved," cried Virginia, in impassioned tones. "Oh! from my very heart I thank you, my dear friend, my dear brother!"

At that moment Florida entered. She seemed terribly discomposed, and started for the door as she saw the two advancing, throwing an almost evil look upon Virginia.

"Wait one moment, please," said Dudley, quietly.

"This little girl has something to confess."

"I know," began Florida, hurriedly, then paused.

"She is Mrs. ——— what's the name?" asked Dudley, playfully, though his voice faltered.

"You mean that you are Parker's wife. I have found that out," said Florida, coldly, and hurried from the room. Horace Dudley hastened to his friend, Le Roy. Virginia flew to her chamber. Florida sought her own apartment.

"I will not tell her!" she cried, her whole being convulsed with secret agony—"she shall not know. Let him die—let him die."

But all that dreary night she saw Parker in her dream accusing her as his murderer, and with pitiful voice pleading to see Virginia only once—only once before he died. She could not bear this burden, and early in the morning, she repaired to Virginia's chamber, waked her from her troubled sleep and told her to prepare for an early visit to Parker. On the same day she replied to an offer of marriage, and crowned the hopes of Le Roy by naming an early day for the wedding, only stipulating that it should be entirely private. Virginia came home an hour after she had sent the note. She walked pale and tearless into Florida's dressing-room, and to her inquiring look said, wildly: "He was not there;" then, with a hysterical cry, she went into her own room.

"Not there?" cried Florida, following her. "What do you mean, Virginia? Not that he—"

"He is gone—went last night. Was taken away in a carriage. But Mr. Dudley will help me," she cried, passionately; "he says there is a deadly wrong somewhere, and there must be. Florida, have pity—tell me if you know."

"I do not know, Virginia."

"If I could have gone yesterday!" she cried—and Florida stole quietly out of the apartment.

CHAPTER XV.

FLORIDA HUMBLD.

"MOTHER, I am married."

So said Florida, entering the room where Mrs. Owen sat. She was dressed in a traveling suit, and was unusually pale, but she smiled and seemed in good spirits.

"Married?"

"Yes, to Mr. Le Roy. I was married this morning at half-past seven."

"And where is Virginia?" cried Mrs. Owen.

"Virginia? down-stairs, I suppose," said Florida, quietly taking off her bonnet.

"Are you going to stay here?" queried Mrs. Owen.

"Oh! yes, for a month or two, at least. We have decided to be very unfashionable, and give up the tour. I shall arrange some way for Virginia and you to be together, when we leave, as I only took the house for a year. It is for you to say whether you will stay here or go to the country."

"In the country—and will Virginia be with me? She and I together? Oh! I will go back to the old home where Thomas took me. You will not care?"

"No, suit yourself," said Florida, who had grown somewhat humbler; "if you wish to return to the cottage, it will be ready for you by spring."

She hummed a little as she went out, but stopped as the door closed, drew a long, regretful sigh, then hurried down-stairs. On the table in the room below stood some beautiful loaves of wedding cake. A gentleman had been talking with her husband, and seemed trying to avoid her as he was passing out. She encountered him, however, and her husband introduced him. She noticed that his hair was *very red and very long*.

"He is my confidential clerk," said Mr. Le Roy, smilingly. "Well, my love, we have stolen a march on all our friends—what will they say?"

"It matters little to me," she replied, somewhat coldly, smiling nevertheless; and he seemed so entirely satisfied with his beautiful bride, that he did not notice her apparent apathy.

Nearly two months had elapsed, and Mr. Le Roy had gone to attend to his estate, promising not to be absent over a week. Florida had grown a little thinner, and wore an uneasy, suspicious air at times, that made her seem unlike her former self.

One evening, Virginia and Mr. Dudley sat in one of the small drawing-rooms with Florida. The latter was expecting her husband home on the following day. Without, the wind was high, but the sky was clear and full of stars. Virginia sat in a low rocking-chair. Dudley held the evening paper beneath the gas, but he was not reading. Some counter influence called off his thoughts. He glanced now and then at Virginia, who seemed fragile as a spirit, so much had her great sorrow worn upon her.

A deep sigh, louder than she meant it should be, broke the silence. Both Florida and Dudley started, and looked inquiringly toward Virginia, who had covered her face with both hands. An expression of pity troubled Florida's features.

"Virginia," she said, "I can help you find Parker, if he lives."

The young girl sprang to her feet; her hands were outstretched. The mute appeal was enough.

"Sit down here, Virginia, and let me tell you something. I found him by putting you asleep."

Virginia looked her wonder.

"You are a clairvoyant!"

"Any thing to find him."

"Sit perfectly passive then," said Florida.

In a few moments Virginia's head rested against the back of the easy-chair.

"Now," said Florida, "go and find Parker."

"It is a long way," murmured Virginia. "It is very long," she said, after awhile, drawing a long breath. Then looking up, she whispered: "How bright the stars are! I think they look brighter out here."

Florida and Dudley exchanged glances.

"It is the country," said Virginia, solemnly; "the wide, free country. Oh! those farm-houses look so cheerful—what a ways they brought him! I shall soon be there."

"Have you found the house?" queried Florida.
"I see it," she replied. "It is low and dark—oh! yes, there's a light at the side. Yes, he is there!" she added, cheerfully. "He is in bed, sleeping."

And—why! Mr. Le Roy is here."

Florida grew pale as death.
"Is any one else there?"
"Yes, a man with long, red hair. They are both burning letters. Mr. Le Roy is reading one. It is from his other wife."

Florida grew yet whiter—her eyes like balls of fire.
"You cannot believe in this," said Dudley.

"I do," Florida responded, her lips closing.
"Can you hear what they say?" she continued, breathlessly.

"Mr. Le Roy says he must keep him concealed, now, for Florida would never forgive him."

"For what?" queried Florida, while Dudley arose and moved away.

"He says without doubt he is his son."

"Who—who?" gasped Florida.
"It must be Parker," articulated Virginia, slowly.

Florida fell back, utterly powerless, for a few seconds. When she moved again, the blood had rushed over her face and receded again, leaving her of a more deathly pallor than before.

"Virginia, are you sure it is Le Roy?"
"Sure? don't I see him? And now he looks up. One of the letters is sliding through a crevice in the floor. It has gone down. Mr. Le Roy is trying to recover it. No, he cannot. He is laughing."

"Look at Parker, Virginia."

"Poor Parker!" sighed Virginia. "He is not taken as good care of as he ought to be. I wish I could nurse him. He is very sick."

"Why not ask her where he is?" said Horace Dudley.

"I have no need," was her reply, with a sickly smile. "Virginia, you may come back." A few efforts and the young girl awoke. For some moments she was bewildered, but gradually she remembered.

"Did I find him?"
"Yes; he composed, we shall know all about it in a day or two," said Florida.

Dudley and Virginia waited patiently. Le Roy came home. Florida did not meet him. He sought through the house and found her in a retired room.

"What is the matter, Florida?" he asked, noticing her changed manner.

"Why did you not bring your son with you?" she asked, looking him full in the face.

"My son?" he crimsoned—moved confusedly.

"Yes, your son," continued Florida. "You will find that evasion is useless with me. Night before last, you were in a certain farm-house. Do you ask proof that I know? You read letters that were addressed to you thus—'My dear husband'—but they were not from me. Those letters, the most of them,

you burned. One fell within a crevice in the boarding of the floor—it remains there yet."

The guilty man started back.

"Your friend was with you," she continued—"your confidential clerk—the man with the red hair."

Speechless with amazement, Le Roy sat the very picture of guilty cowardice.

"How in heaven's name did you know?" he cried.

"No matter how I knew," continued Florida.

"This thing must be explained in a satisfactory manner, or we must part. You were not married to his mother?"

"Yes, thank God, we were married," said Le Roy, in a voice that showed his humiliation. "I have not that sin upon my conscience."

"And is she living?" cried Florida.

"No—no; poor soul! she died, years ago."

"And you were unmanly enough to desert her," exclaimed Florida, in a voice of scorn.

"Spare me, Florida, spare me! I left her, but at times managed to keep sight of her, and still supply her wants. Oh, Florida, I was heartless. But I yearned to that boy when I saw him. I had lost sight of him for five years. But I loved you—believe me, Florida—as I never loved woman before—no, never, God is my witness. I deserve to suffer, however. If the knowledge of this wretched fact steels your heart against me, I must submit. It will be but a just recompense."

His voice was so utterly heartbroken, that Florida was softened. She had begun to love him before this sad revelation; her pride, not her heart, condemned him now, for it was better than she had feared. Wickedly as he had done, it had not been what she dreaded above all other things—the knowledge that he had deliberately deceived and ruined a helpless woman. He pleaded for forgiveness; his devotion, his humility could not but in press her with the conviction that he repented, and Florida, though grieved to the heart and utterly mortified, consented at last to forgive him. It was arranged that Parker should be taken to the cottage, and placed under the care of his devoted wife, while Le Roy and Florida went to England.

One more remove, and Parker breathed again the pure air of the little Connecticut village. It was in the early spring. The good news had revived him somewhat. Mrs. Owen was childishly happy, now that she had Virginia all to herself; and the young matron seemed to grow beautiful daily in the midst of her abundant cares. Now it was known that Parker had found his father, that disgrace no longer attached to his name, that he was heir to a large fortune, the shallow gossips of the village were silenced.

"The dear book," the work of love born of suffering, was out at last, and bringing in a golden harvest. After the cruel unrest of years, peace, plenty and beauty lingered lovingly around him. Dear friends often came (among them Dudley), for it was a true paradise there. Florida wrote them she was well—let us hope happy.

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